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APRIL 1958

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THE VOLCANIC CONCLUSION OF
THE BIG TIME
By
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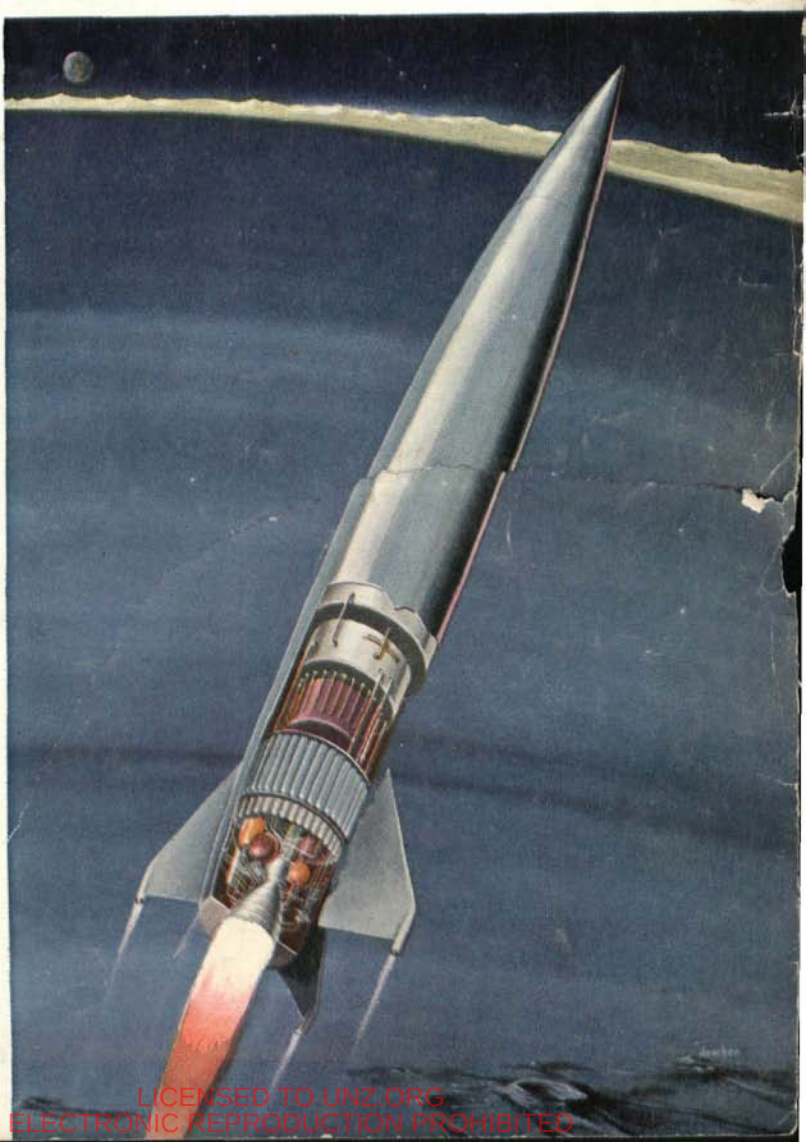

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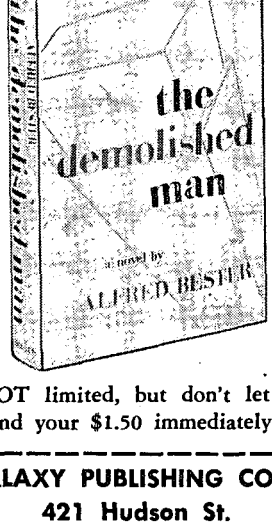

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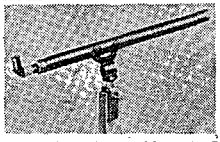

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NO TURBAN, PLEASE

WHEN science newsbreaks make the headlines these days, reporters call and say, "Congratulations. Another prediction has come true." And I say wearily, "Thanks on behalf of our writers and readers, but science fiction isn't in the prediction business." And they say agreeably, "Of course not, but what are you guys working on now?" as if I have a hot tip from the future that I am reluctant to divulge.

No amount of explanation or argument seems able to change this attitude. What, you may ask, is the big deal? Why not let people think science fiction is in the prediction business and reap their money while we can? There is one sound economic reason — if they come searching for the wrong things, they'll stay just long enough to discover these are only incidental.

For example, Arthur Koestler sought THE answer in science fiction — and attacks it ferociously now because THE answer is the last thing science fiction wants to find. His fury at its refusal to be what it isn't undoubtedly cost us some readers, but not enough to worry about; multiplied, it can be something to worry about indeed.

It's a plain non-crass fact that the economic is the main motivation of any magazine, science fiction or otherwise, so entertainment is its goal. The more successfully it entertains, the more successfully it sells.

In the case of science fiction, there are, however, great fringe benefits arising from the *way* in which we go about creating entertainment. I could probably state the process and results in a sentence, but I wouldn't make any cornea cope with any such bulging monstrosity. It has to be gone into in some detail, for the benefits to be seen.

Science fiction writers begin with the present: existing knowledge, some addition to it, a new hypothesis, an observed trend of one kind or another, and so forth.

There are two vital values here.

If depiction of one's own era is the mark of literature, as critics declare when calling science fiction "escapist," then science fiction fully qualifies as literature. More than any other branch, it has to search its times minutely in its avid quest for themes. Of course the average science fiction reader knows more about the present than

(*Continued on page 97*)

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ALL ORIGINAL STORIES

Galaxy SCIENCE FICTION

APRIL, 1958
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CONTENTS

NOVELETS

THE SITTERS ..... *by Clifford D. Simak* 6
FIRST MAN ..... *by Clyde Brown* 56

SHORT STORIES

GARTH AND THE VISITOR ..... *by L. J. Stecher* 31
THE EEL ..... *by Miriam Allen deFord* 76
OLD RAMBLING HOUSE ..... *by Frank Herbert* 89

2-PART SERIAL—Conclusion

THE BIG TIME ..... *by Fritz Leiber* 98

SCIENCE DEPARTMENT

FOR YOUR INFORMATION ..... *by Willy Ley* 41
The Island of the Stone Heads

FEATURES

EDITOR'S PAGE ..... *by H. L. Gold* 4
GALAXY'S FIVE STAR SHELF ..... *by Floyd C. Gale* 85
FORECAST 88

Cover by DEMBER Showing: Cutaway of Moon Rocket engine section during flight back to Earth, to indicate nuclear reactor, electrical conversion unit, radiation rings and motor. Fins house retractable support legs for vertical takeoff and landing. Foreground: Mare Imbrium. Background: Ringwall double-lighted by sunshine and earthshine.

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THE SITTERS

BY CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

It was their job to sit, so that wasn't the sinister part. Then what? They were sitting on a town . . . and the town was unaware of it!

Illustrated by WOOD

THE first week of school was finished. Johnson Dean, superintendent of Millville High, sat at his desk, enjoying the quiet and the satisfaction of late Friday afternoon.

The quiet was massacred by Coach Jerry Higgins. He clomped into the office and threw his muscular blond frame heavily in a chair.

"Well, you can call off football for the year," he said angrily. "We can drop out of the conference."

Dean pushed away the papers on which he had been working and leaned back in his chair. The sunlight from the western windows turned his silver thatch into a seeming halo. His pale, blue-veined, wrinkled hands smoothed out, painstakingly, the fading crease in his fading trousers.

"What has happened now?" he asked.

"It's King and Martin, Mr. Dean. They aren't coming out this year."

Dean clucked sympathetically, but somewhat hollowly, as if his heart was not quite in it. "Let me see," he said. "If I remember rightly, those two were very good last year. King was in the line and Martin quarterback."

Higgins exploded in righteous indignation. "Who ever heard of a quarterback deciding he wouldn't play no more? And not just an ordinary boy, but one of the very best. He made all-conference last year."

"You've talked to them, of course?"

"I got down on my knees to them," said the coach. "I asked

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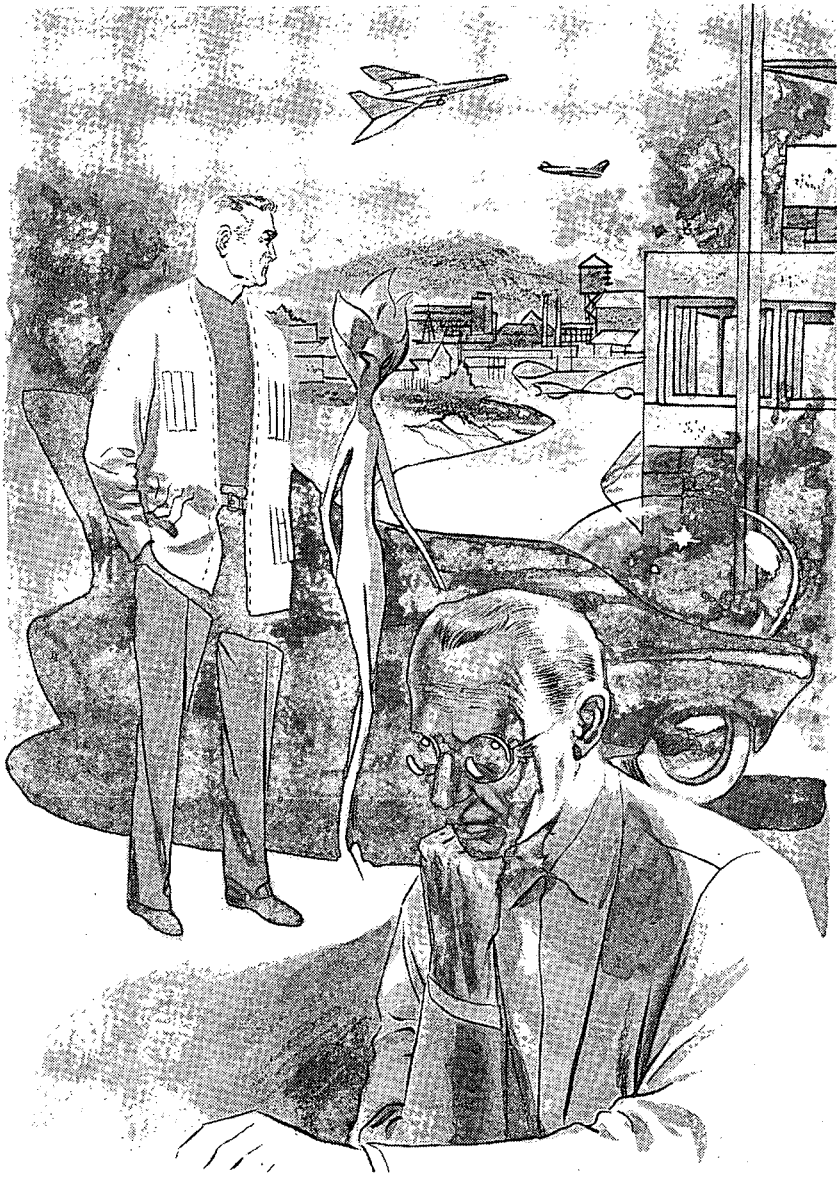

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them did they want that I should lose my job. I asked is there anything you got against me. I told them they were letting down the school. I told them we wouldn't have a team without them. They didn't laugh at me, but—"

"They wouldn't laugh at you," said Dean. "Those boys are gentlemen. In fact, all the youngsters in school—"

"They're a pack of sissies!" stormed the coach.

DEAN said gently, "That is a matter of opinion. There have been moments when I also wasn't able to attach as much importance to football as it seemed to me I should."

"But that's different," argued the coach. "When a man grows up, naturally he will lose some interest. But these are kids. This just isn't healthy. These young fellows should be out there pawing up the earth. All kids should have a strong sense of competition. And even if they don't, there's the financial angle. Any outstanding football man has a chance, when he goes to college—"

"Our kids don't need athletic subsidies," said Dean, a little sharply. "They're getting more than their share of scholastic scholarships."

"If we had a lot more material," moaned Higgins, "King and Martin wouldn't mean so much. We wouldn't win too often, but we still would have a team. But as it is — do you realize, Mr. Dean, that there have been fewer coming out each year? Right now, I haven't more than enough—"

"You've talked to King and Martin. You're sure they won't reconsider?"

"You know what they told me? They said football interfered with studies!"

The way Higgins said it, it was rank heresy.

"I guess, then," Dean said cheerfully, "that we'll just have to face it."

"But it isn't normal," the coach protested. "There aren't any kids who think more of studies than they do of football. There aren't any kids so wrapped up in books—"

"There are," said Dean. "There are a lot, right here at Millville. You should take a look at the grade averages over the past ten years, if you don't believe it."

"What gets me is that they don't act like kids. They act like a bunch of adults." The coach shook his head, as if to say it was all beyond him. "It's a dirty shame. If only some of those big bruisers would turn out, we'd have the makings of a team."

"Here, also," Dean reminded him, "we have the makings of men and women that Millville in the future may very well be proud of."

The coach got up angrily. "We won't win a game," he warned.

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"Even Bagley will beat us."

"That is something," Dean observed philosophically, "that shan't worry me too much."

He sat quietly at his desk and listened to the hollow ringing of the coach's footsteps going down the corridor, dimming out with distance.

And he heard the swish and rumble of a janitorial servo-mechanism wiping down the stairs. He wondered where Stuffy was. Fiddling around somewhere, no doubt. With all the scrubbers and the washers and wipers and other mechanical contraptions, there wasn't too much to take up Stuffy's time. Although Stuffy, in his day, had done a lot of work — he'd been on the go from dark to dark, a top-notch janitor.

IF it weren't for the labor shortage, Stuffy would have been retired several years ago. But they didn't retire men any more the way they had at one time. With Man going to the stars, there now was more than the human race could do. If they had been retiring men, Dean thought, he himself would be without a job.

And there was nothing he would have hated more than that. For Millville High was his. He had made it his. For more than fifty years, he'd lived for Millville High, first as a young and eager teacher, then as principal, and now, the last fifteen years or so, as its superintendent.

He had given everything he had. And it had given back. It had been wife and child and family, a beginning and an end. And he was satisfied, he told himself — satisfied on this Friday of a new school year, with Stuffy puttering somewhere in the building and no football team — or, at least, next to none.

He rose from the desk and stood looking out the window. A student, late in going home, was walking across the lawn. Dean thought he knew her, although of late his eyes had not been so good for distance.

He squinted at her harder, almost certain it was Judy Charleson. He'd known her grandfather back in the early days and the girl, he thought, had old Henry Charleson's gait. He chuckled, thinking back. Old Charleson, he recalled, had been a slippery one in a business deal. There had been that time he had gotten tangled up in the deal for tube-liners to be used by a starship outfit . . .

He jerked his mind away, tried to wipe out his thinking of the old days. It was a sign of advancing age, the dawn of second childhood.

But however that might be, old Henry Charleson was the only man in Millville who had ever had a thing to do with starships—except Lamont Stiles.

Dean grinned a little, remember-

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ing Lamont Stiles and the grimness in him and how he'd amounted to something after many years, to the horrified exasperation of many people who had confidently prophesied he'd come to no good end.

And there was no one now, of course, who knew, or perhaps would ever know, what kind of end Lamont Stiles had finally come to. Or if, in fact, he'd come to an end as yet.

Lamont Stiles, Dean thought, might this very moment be striding down the street of some fantastic city on some distant world.

And if that were so, and if he came home again, what would he bring this time?

The last time he'd come home—the only time he ever had come home—he had brought the Sitters, and they were a funny lot.

Dean turned from the window and walked back to the desk. He sat down and pulled the papers back in front of him. But he couldn't get down to work. That was the way it often was. He'd start thinking of the old days, when there were many friends and many things to do, and get so involved in thinking that he couldn't settle down to work.

HE heard the shuffle coming along the hall and shoved the papers to one side. He could tell that it was Stuffy, from the familiar shuffle, coming by to pass the time of day.

Dean wondered at the quiet anticipation he felt within himself. Although it was not so strange, once one considered it. There weren't many left like Stuffy, not many he could talk with.

It was odd with the old, he thought. Age dissolved or loosened the ties of other days. The old died or moved away or were bound by infirmities. Or they drew within themselves, into a world of their own, where they sought a comfort they could find no longer in the outer world.

Stuffy shuffled to the doorway, stopped and leaned against the jamb. He wiped his drooping yellow mustaches with a greasy hand.

"What's ailing the coach?" he asked. "He went busting out of here like he was turpentined."

"He has no football team," said Dean. "Or he tells me that he hasn't any."

"He cries early every season," Stuffy said. "It's just an act."

"I'm not so sure this time. King and Martin aren't coming out."

Stuffy shuffled a few more paces into the room and dropped into a chair.

"It's them Sitters," Stuffy declared. "They're the cause of it."

Dean sat upright. "What is that you said!"

"I been watching it for years. You can spot the kids that the

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Sitters sat with or that went to their nursery school. They done something to them kids."

"Fairy tale," said Dean.

"It ain't a fairy tale," Stuffy declared stubbornly. "You know I don't take no stock in superstition. Just because them Sitters are from some other planet . . . Say, did you ever find out what planet they were from?"

Dean shook his head. "I don't know that Lamont ever said. He might have, but I never heard it."

"They're weird critters," said Stuffy, stroking his mustaches slowly to lend an air of deliberation to his words, "but I never held their strangeness against them. After all, they ain't the only aliens on the Earth. The only ones we have in Millville, of course, but there are thousands of other critters from the stars scattered round the Earth."

Dean nodded in agreement, scarcely knowing what he was agreeing with. He said nothing, however, for there was no need of that. Once Stuffy got off to a running start, he'd go on and on.

"They seem right honest beings," Stuffy said. "They never played on no one's sympathy. They just settled in, after Lamont went away and left them, and never asked no one to intercede for them. They made an honest living all these years and that is all one could expect of them."

"And yet," said Dean, "you think they've done something to the kids."

"They changed them. Ain't you noticed it?"

DEAN shook his head. "I never thought to notice. I've known these youngsters for years. I knew their folks before them. How do you think they were changed?"

"They grew them up too fast," Stuffy said.

"Talk sense," snapped Dean. "Who grew what too fast?"

"The Sitters grew the kids too fast. That's what's wrong with them. Here they are in high school and they're already grown up."

From somewhere on one of the floors below came the dismal hooting of a servo-mechanism in distress.

Stuffy sprang to his feet. "That's the mopper-upper. I'll bet you it got caught in a door again."

He swung around and galloped off at a rapid shuffle.

"Stupid machine!" he yelped as he went out the door.

Dean pulled the papers back in front of him again and picked up a pencil. It was getting late and he had to finish.

But he didn't see the papers. He saw many little faces staring up at him from where the papers lay — solemn, big-eyed little faces with an elusive look about them.

And he knew that elusive look

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— the look of dawning adulthood staring out of childish faces.

They grew them up too fast!

"No," said Dean to himself. "No, it couldn't be!"

And yet there was corroborative evidence: The high averages, the unusual number of scholarships, the disdain for athletics. And, as well, the general attitude. And the lack of juvenile delinquency — for years, Millville had been proud that its juvenile delinquency had been a minor problem. He remembered that several years ago he had been asked to write an article about it for a parent-teacher magazine.

He tried to remember what he had written in that article and slowly bits of it came back to him — the realization of parents that their children were a part of the family and not mere appendages; the role played by the churches of the town; the emphasis placed on the social sciences by the schools.

"And was I wrong?" he asked himself. "Was it none of these, but something else entirely—someone else entirely?"

He tried to work and couldn't. He was too upset. He could not erase the smiling little faces that were staring up at him.

Finally he shoved the papers in a drawer and got up from the desk. He put on his worn topcoat and sat the battered old black felt hat atop his silver head.

On the ground floor, he found Stuffy herding the last of the servo-mechanisms into their cubby for the night. Stuffy was infuriated.

"It got itself caught in a heating grill," he raged. "If I hadn't gotten there in the nick of time, it would have wrecked the works." He shook his head dolefully. "Them machines are fine when everything goes well. But just let something happen and they panic. It was best the old way, John."

STUFFY slammed the door on the last of the waddling machines and locked it savagely.

"Stuffy, how well did you know Lamont Stiles?" asked Dean.

Stuffy rubbed his mustaches in fine deliberation. "Knew him well. Lamont and me, we were kids together. You were a little older. You were in the crowd ahead."

Dean nodded his head slowly. "Yes, I remember, Stuffy. Odd that you and I stayed on in the old home town. So many of the others left."

"Lamont ran away when he was seventeen. There wasn't much to stay for. His old lady was dead and his old man was drinking himself to death and Lamont had been in a scrape or two. Everyone was agreed Lamont never would amount to nothing."

"It's hard for a boy when a whole town turns against him."

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"That's a fact," said the janitor. "There was no one on his side. He told me when he left that someday he'd come back and show them. But I just thought he was talking big. Like a kid will do, you know, to bolster up himself."

"You were wrong," said Dean.

"Never wronger, John."

For Lamont Stiles had come back, more than thirty years after he had run away, back to the old weather-beaten house on Maple Street that had waited empty for him all the lonely years; had come back, an old man when he still was scarcely fifty, big and tough despite the snow-white hair and the skin turned cordovan with the burn of many alien suns; back from far wandering among the distant stars.

But he was a stranger. The town remembered him; he had forgotten it. Years in alien lands had taken the town and twisted it in his brain, and what he remembered of it was more fantasy than truth — the fantasy spawned by years of thinking back and of yearning and of hate.

"I must go," Dean said. "Carrie will have supper ready. She doesn't like to have it getting cold."

"Good night, John," said the janitor.

The sun was almost down when Dean came out the door and started down the walk. It was later than he'd thought. Carrie would be sore at him and she would bawl him out.

Dean chuckled to himself. There was no one quite like Carrie.

Not wife, for he'd never had a wife. Not mother or sister, for both of those were dead. But housekeeper, faithful all the years — and a bit of wife and sister, and sometimes even mother.

A man's loyalties are queer, he thought. They blind him and they bind him and they shape the man he is. And, through them, he serves and achieves a kind of greatness, although at times the greatness may be gray and pallid and very, very quiet.

Not like the swaggering and the bitter greatness of Lamont Stiles, who came striding from the stars, bringing with him those three queer creatures who became the Sitters. Bringing them and installing them in his house on Maple Street and then, in a year or two, going off to the stars again and leaving them in Millville.

Queer, Dean thought, that so provincial a town as this should accept so quietly these exotic beings. Queerer still that the mothers of the town, in time, should entrust their children to the aliens' care.

AS Dean turned the corner into Lincoln Street, he met a woman walking with a knee-high boy.

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It was Mildred Anderson, he saw — or had been Mildred Anderson, but she was married now and for the life of him he could not recall the name. Funny, he thought, how fast the young ones grew up. Not more than a couple of years ago, it seemed, that Mildred was in school — although he knew he must be wrong on that; it would be more like ten.

He tipped his hat. "Good evening, Mildred. My, how the boy is growing."

"I doe to cool," the child lisped.

His mother interpreted. "He means he goes to school. He is so proud of it."

"Nursery school, of course."

"Yes, Mr. Dean. The Sitters. They are such lovely things. And so good with children. And there's the cost. Or, rather, the lack of it. You just give them a bouquet of flowers or a little bottle of perfume or a pretty picture and they are satisfied. They positively refuse to take any money. I can't understand that. Can you, Mr. Dean?"

"No," said Dean. "I can't."

He'd forgotten what a talker Mildred was. There had been a period in school, he recalled, when she had been appropriately nicknamed Gabby.

"I sometimes think," she said, hurrying on so she'd miss no time for talk, "that we people here on Earth attach too much importance to money. The Sitters don't seem to know what money is, or if they do, they pay no attention to it. As if it were something that was not important. But I understand there are other races like that. It makes one think, doesn't it, Mr. Dean?"

And he remembered now another infuriating trait of Mildred's — how she inevitably ended any string of sentences with a dangling question.

He didn't try to answer. He knew an answer was not expected of him.

"I must be getting on," he said. "I am late already."

"It was nice to see you, Mr. Dean," said Mildred. "I so often think of my days in school and sometimes it seems like just positively ages and there are other times when it seems no more than just yesterday and . . ."

"Very nice, indeed," said Dean, lifting his hat to her, then almost scurrying off.

It was undignified, he grumbled to himself, being routed in broad daylight on a public street by a talkative woman.

As he went up the walk to the house, he heard Carrie bustling angrily about.

"Johnson Dean," she cried the instant he came in the door, "you sit right down and eat. Your food's already cold. And it's my circle night. Don't you even stop to wash."

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Dean calmly hung up his hat and coat.

"For that matter," he said, "I guess I don't need to wash. My kind of job, a man doesn't get too dirty."

SHE was bustling about in the dining area, pouring his cup of coffee and straightening up the bouquet of mums that served for the centerpiece.

"Since it's my circle night," she said, laying deliberate stress upon the words to shame him for being late, "I won't stay to wash the dishes. You just leave them on the table. I will do them later."

He sat down meekly to eat.

Somehow, for some reason he could not understand, fulfilling a need of which he was not aware, he suddenly felt safe. Safe and secure against a nagging worry and a half-formed fear that had been building up within him without his knowing it.

Carrie came through the living room, settling a determined hat upon her determined head. She had the very air of a woman who was late for her circle meeting through no fault of her own. She halted at the door.

"You got everything you need?" she asked, her eyes making a swift inventory of the table.

"Everything." He chuckled. "Have a good time at the circle. Pick up a lot of gossip."

It was his favorite quip and he knew it irked her — and it was childish, too. But he could not resist it.

She flounced out of the door and he heard her putting down her heels with unnecessary firmness as she went down the walk.

With her going, a hard silence gripped the house and the deeper dusk moved in as he sat at the table eating.

Safe, he thought — old Johnson Dean, school man, safe inside the house his grandfather had built— how many years ago? Old-fashioned now, with its split-level floor plan and its high-bricked fireplace, with its double, attached garage and the planter out in front.

Safe and lonely.

And safe against what threat, against what creeping disturbance, so subtle that it failed of recognition?

He shook his head at that.

But lonely — that was different. That could be explained. The middle-young, he thought, and the very old are lonely. The middle-young because full communication had not been established, and the very old because communication had broken down.

Society was stratified, he told himself, stratified and sectored and partitioned off by many different factors — by age, by occupation, by education, by financial status. And the list did not end there. One

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could go on and on. It would be interesting, if a man could only find the time, to chart the stratification of humanity. Finished, if it ever could be finished, that chart would be a weird affair.

He finished the meal and wiped his mouth carefully with the napkin. He pushed back from the table and prowled the darkening living area.

He knew that he should at least pick up the dishes and tidy up the table. By rights, he should even wash them. He had caused Carrie a lot of fuss because he had been late. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He couldn't settle down. Safe, he still was not at peace.

THERE was no use in putting this business off any longer, he realized, no use to duck the fear that was nagging at him. He knew what it was he faced, if he only would admit it.

Stuffy was crazy, of course. He could not possibly be right. He'd been thinking too much — imagining, rather.

The kids were no different now than they'd ever been.

Except that the grade averages had improved noticeably in the last ten years or so.

Except that there were, as one might expect of such grade averages, an increase in scholarships.

Except that the glitter of competitive sports was beginning to wear off.

Except that there was, in Millville, almost no delinquency.

And those solemn childish faces, with the big, bright eyes, staring up at him from the papers on his desk.

He paced slowly up and down the carpeting before the big brick fireplace, and the dead, black maw beneath the chimney throat, with the bitter smell of old wood ashes in it, seemed to be a mouth making sport of him.

He cracked one feebly clenched old fist into a shaky plam.

"It can't be right," he said fiercely to himself.

And yet, on the face of all evidence, it was.

The children in Millville were maturing faster; they were growing up, intellectually, much faster than they should.

And perhaps even more than that.

Growing in a new dimension, he wondered. Receding farther from the savage that still lingered in humanity. For sports, organized sports on whatever basis, still remained a refined product of the cave — some antagonism that Man had carried forward under many different guises and which broke forth at least partially in the open in the field of sports.

If he could only talk with the students, he thought, if he could

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somehow find out what they thought, then there might be a chance of running this thing to the ground.

But that was impossible. The barriers were too high and intricate, the lines of communication much too cluttered. For he was old and they were young; he was authority and they were the regimented. Once again the stratifications would keep them apart. There was no way in which he could approach them.

It was all right to say there was something happening, ridiculous as it might sound. But the important matter, if such should be the case, was to discover the cause and to plot the trend.

And Stuffy must be wrong. For it was fantastic to suggest the Sitters were engineering it.

PECULIARLY enough, the Sitters, alien as they were, had established themselves as solid citizens of Millville. They would, he was sure, do nothing to jeopardize the position they had won — the position of being accepted and generally let alone and little talked about.

They would do nothing to attract attention to themselves. Through the years, too many other aliens had gotten into trouble through attempts to meddle and by exhibitionism. Although, come to think of it, what might have seemed to be exhibitionism, from the human viewpoint, possibly had been no more than normal alien conduct.

It had been the good fortune of the Sitters that their natural mother-disposition had enabled them to fit into the human pattern. They had proven ideal baby-sitters and in this they had an economic value and were the more readily accepted.

For many years, they had taken care of the Millville babies and they were everything that a sitter ought to be. And now they ran a nursery school, although, he remembered, there had been some ruckus over that, since they quite understandably did not hold formal education credits.

He turned on a light and went to the shelves to find something he could read. But there was nothing there that held any interest for him. He ran a finger along the backs of the rows of volumes and his eyes flicked down the titles, but he found absolutely nothing.

He left the shelves and paced over to the large front window and stared out at the street. The street lamps had not come on yet, but there were lights here and there in windows and occasionally a bubble-shaped car moved silently down the pavement, the fanning headlights catching a scurrying bunch of leaves or a crouching cat.

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It was one of the older streets in town; at one time, he had known everyone who had lived upon it. He could call out without hesitation the names of the one-time owners — Wilson, Becket, Johnson, Random — but none of them lived here any longer. The names had changed and the faces were faces that he did not know; the stratification had shifted and he knew almost no one on the street.

The middle-young and the very old, he thought, they are the lonely ones.

He went back to the chair beside the lamp he'd lighted and sat down rather stiffly in it. He fidgeted, drumming his fingers on the arms. He wanted to get up, but there was nothing to get up for, unless it was to wash the dishes, and he didn't want to wash them.

He could take a walk, he told himself. That might be a good idea. There was a lot of comfort in an evening walk.

He got his coat and hat and went out the door and down the walk and turned west at the gate.

He was more than halfway there, skirting the business section, before he admitted to himself that he was heading for the Stiles house and the Sitters — that he had, in fact, never intended doing otherwise.

What he might do there, what he might learn there, he had no idea. There was no actual purpose in his mind. It was almost as if he were on an unknown mission, as if he were being pushed by some unseen force into a situation of no-choice.

HE came to the Stiles house and stood on the walk outside, looking at it.

It was an old house, surrounded by shade trees that had been planted many years before, and the front yard was a wilderness of shrubs. Every once in a while, someone would come and cut the lawn and maybe trim the hedges and fix up the flower beds to pay the Sitters for all the baby-minding they had done, since the Sitters took no money.

And that was a funny thing, Dean thought, their not taking any money — just as if they didn't need it, as if they might not know what to do with it even if they had any. Perhaps they didn't need it, for they bought no food and still they kept on living and never had been sick enough for anyone to know about it. There must have been times when they were cold, although no one ever mentioned it, but they bought no fuel, and Lamont Stiles had left a fund to pay the taxes — so maybe it was true that they had no need of money.

There had been a time, Dean recalled, when there had been a lot of speculation in the town about their not eating — or at least not

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buying any food. But after a time the speculation dwindled down and all anyone would say was that you could never figure a lot of things about alien people and there was no use in trying.

And that was right, of course.

The Stiles house, Dean realized with something of a start, was even older than his house. It was a rambler and they had been popular many years before the split-level had come in.

Heavy drapes were drawn at the windows, but there was light behind the drapes and he knew the Sitters were at home. They were usually home, of course. Except on baby-sitting jobs, they never left the house, and in recent years they had gone out but little, for people had gotten in the habit of dropping off the kids at the Sitters' house. The kids never made a fuss, not even the tiny ones. They all liked going to the Sitters.

He went up the walk and climbed the stoop to ring the bell.

He waited and heard movement in the house.

The door came open and one of the Sitters stood there, with the light behind it, and he had forgotten—it had been many years since he'd seen one of the Sitters.

Shortly after Lamont Stiles had come home, Dean remembered, he had met all three of them, and in the years between, he had seen one of them from time to time a distance on the street. But the memory and the wonder had faded from his mind and now it struck him once again with all the olden force — the faery grace, the sense of suddenly standing face to face with a gentle flower.

The face, if it might be called a face, was sweet — too sweet, so sweet that it had no character and hardly an individuality. A baffling skin arrangement, like the petals of a flower, rose above the face, and the body of the Sitter was slender beyond all belief and yet so full of grace and poise that one forgot the slimness. And about the entire creature hung an air of such sweet simplicity and such a scent of innocence that it blotted out all else.

No wonder, Dean found himself thinking, that the children liked them so.

"MR. Dean," the Sitter said, "won't you please come in? We are very honored."

"Thank you," he said, taking off his hat.

He stepped inside and heard the closing of the door and then the Sitter was at his side again.

"This chair right here," it said. "We reserve this one for our special visitors."

And it was all very sweet and friendly, and yet there was an alien, frightening touch.

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Somewhere there were children laughing in the house. He twisted his head around to find where the laughter came from.

"They're in the nursery," said the Sitter. "I will close the door."

Dean sank into the chair and perched his battered old soft hat on one bony knee, fondling it with his bony fingers.

The Sitter came back and sat down on the floor in front of him, sat down with a single, effortless motion and he had the distinct impression of the swirl of flaring skirts, although the Sitter wore none.

"Now," the Sitter said by way of announcing that Dean commanded its entire attention.

But he did not speak, for the laughter still was in the room. Even with the door to the nursery shut, there still was childish laughter. It came from everywhere all about the room and it was an utterly happy laughter, the gay and abandoned, the unthinking, the spontaneous laughter of children hard at play.

Nor was that all.

Childish sparkle glittered in the air and there was the long forgotten sense of timelessness — of the day that never ended, that was never meant to end. A breeze was blowing out of some never-never land and it carried with it the scent of brook water bearing on its tide flotillas of fallen autumn leaves, and there was, as well, the hint of clover and of marigolds and the smell of fuzzy, new-washed blankets such as are used in cribs.

"Mr. Dean," the Sitter said.

He roused himself guiltily.

"I'm sorry," he told the Sitter. "I was listening to the children."

"But the door is closed."

"The children in this room," he said.

"There are no children in this room."

"Quite right," he said. "Quite right."

But there were. He could hear their laughter and the patter of their feet.

THERE were children, or at least the sense of them, and there was also the sense of many flowers, long since died and shriveled in actuality, but with the feel of them still caged inside the room. And the sense of beauty — the beauty of many different things, of flowers and gee-gaw jewelry and little painted pictures and of gaily colored scarves, of all the things that through the years had been given to the Sitters in lieu of money.

"This room," he said haltingly, half-confused. "It is such a pleasant room. I'd just like to sit here."

He felt himself sink into the room, into the youngness and the gayety. If he let go, he thought,

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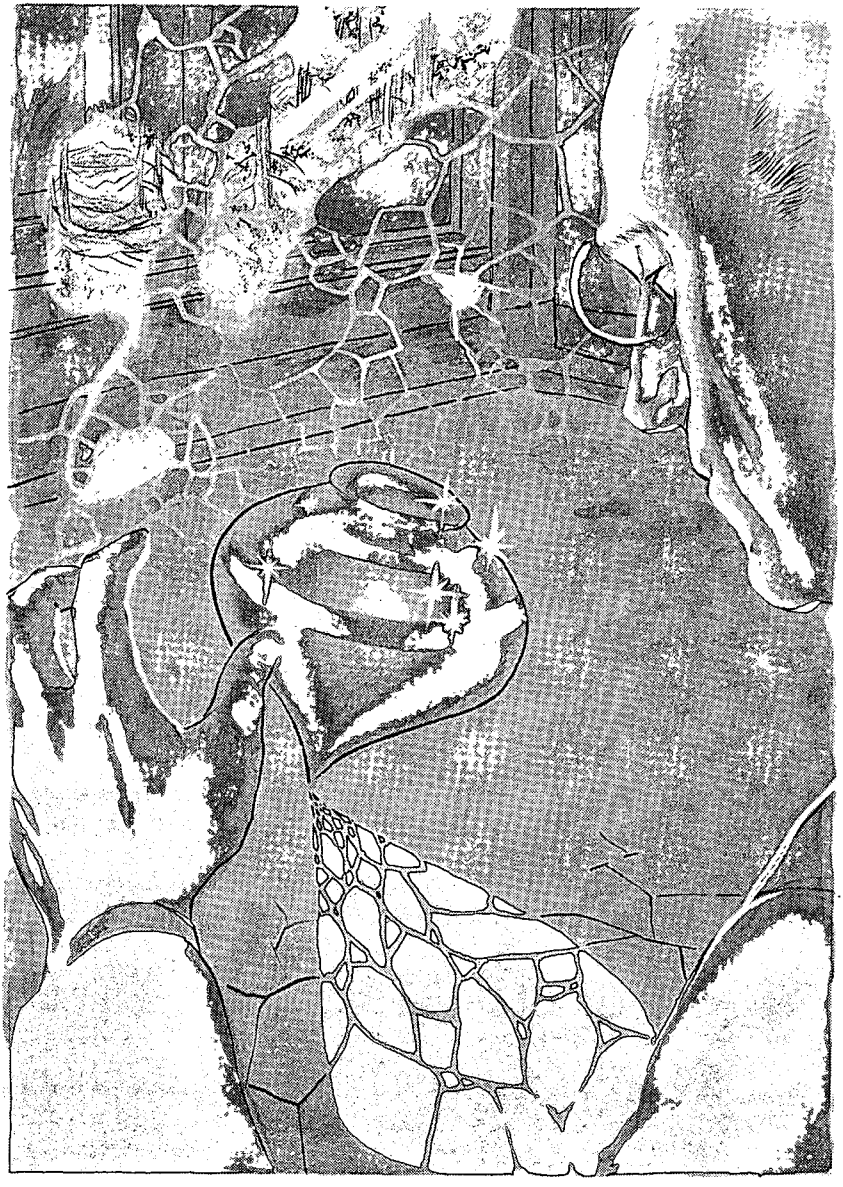

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if he only could let go, he might join the running and be the same as they.

"Mr. Dean," the Sitter said, "you are very sensitive."

"I am very old," said Dean. "Maybe that's the reason."

The room was both ancient and antique. It was a cry across almost two centuries, with its small brick fireplace paneled in white wood, its arched doorways and the windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, covered by heavy drapes of black and green, etched with golden thread. And it had a solid comfort and a deep security that the present architecture of aluminum and glass never could achieve. It was dusty and moldy and cluttered and perhaps unsanitary, but it had the feel of home.

"I am old-fashioned," said Dean, "and, I suspect, very close to senile, and I am afraid that the time has come again to believe in fairy tales and magic."

"It is not magic," the Sitter replied. "It is the way we live, the only way we can live. You will agree that even Sitters must somehow stay alive."

"Yes, I agree," said Dean.

He lifted the battered hat from off his knee and rose slowly to his feet.

The laughter seemed to be fainter now and the patter not so loud. But the sense of youth — of youngness, of vitality and of happiness—still lay within the room. It lent a sheen to the ancient shabbiness and it made his heart begin to ache with a sudden gladness.

The Sitter still sat upon the floor. "There was something you wanted, Mr. Dean?"

Dean fumbled with his hat. "Not any more. I think I've found my answer."

And even as he said it, he knew it was unbelievable, that once he stood outside the door, he'd know with certainty there could be no truth in what he'd found.

The Sitter rose. "You will come again? We would love to have you."

"Perhaps," said Dean, and turned toward the door.

Suddenly there was a top spinning on the floor, a golden top with flashing jewels set in it that caught the light and scattered it in a million flashing colors, and as it spun, it played a whistling tune — the kind of music that got inside and melted down one's soul.

DEAN felt himself let go — as, sitting in the chair, he had thought it was impossible for him to do. And the laughter came again and the world outside withdrew and the room suddenly was filled with the marvelous light of Christmas.

He took a quick step forward and he dropped his hat. He didn't know his name, nor where he was,

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nor how he might have come there, and he didn't care. He felt a gurgling happiness welling up in him and he stooped to reach out for the top.

He missed it by an inch or two and he shuffled forward, stooping, reaching, and his toe caught in a hole in the ancient carpeting and he crashed down on his knees.

The top was gone and the Christmas light snapped out and the world rushed in upon him. The gurgling happiness had gone and he was an old man in a beauty-haunted house, struggling from his knees to face an alien creature.

"I am sorry," said the Sitter. "You almost had it. Perhaps some other time."

He shook his head. "No! Not another time!"

The Sitter answered kindly, "It's the best we have to offer."

Dean fumbled his hat back on his head and turned shakily to the door. The Sitter opened it and he staggered out.

"Come again," the Sitter said, most sweetly. "Any time you wish."

On the street outside, Dean stopped and leaned against a tree. He took off his hat and mopped his brow.

Now, where he had felt only shock before, the horror began creeping in — the horror of a kind of life that did not eat as human beings ate, but in another way, who sucked their nourishment from beauty and from youth, who drained a bouquet dry and who nibbled from the happy hours of a laughing child, and even munched the laughter.

It was no wonder that the children of this village matured beyond their years. For they had their childishness stripped from them by a hungry form of life that looked on them as fodder. There might be, he thought, only so much of happy running and of childish laughter dealt out to any human. And while some might not use their quota, there still might be a limit on it, and once one had used it all, then it was gone and a person became an adult without too much of wonder or of laughter left within him.

The Sitters took no money. There was no reason that they should, for they had no need of it. Their house was filled with all the provender they had stowed away for years.

And in all those years, he was the first to know, the first to sense the nature of those aliens brought home by Lamont Stiles. It was a sobering thought — that he should be the first to find it out. He had said that he was old and that might be the reason. But that had been no more than words, rising to his lips almost automatically as a part of his professional self-pity. Yet there might be something in it even so.

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Could it be possible that, for the old, there might be certain compensations for the loss of other faculties? As the body slowed and the mind began to dim, might some magical ability, a sort of psychic bloodhound sense, rise out of the embers of a life that was nearly spent?

HE was always pothering around about how old he was, he told himself, as if the mere fact of getting old might be a virtue. He was forgetful of the present and his preoccupation with the past was growing to the danger point. He was close to second childhood and he was the one who knew it—and might that be the answer? Might that be why he'd seen the top and known the Christmas lights?

He wondered what might have happened if he could have grabbed the top.

He put his hat back on and stepped out from the tree and went slowly up the walk, heading back for home.

What could he do about it, he wondered, now that he'd unearthed the Sitters' secret? He could run and tattle, surely, but there'd be no one to believe him. They would listen to him and they would be polite so as not to hurt his feelings, yet there was no one in the village but would take it for an old man's imaginings, and there'd be nothing that he could do about it. For beyond his own sure knowledge, he had not a shred of proof.

He might call attention to the maturity of the young people, as Stuffy had called his attention to it this very afternoon. But even there he would find no proof, for in the final reckoning, all the villagers would retreat to rationalization. Parental pride, if nothing else, might require they should. Not a single one of them would find much cause for wonder in the fact that a boy or girl of theirs was singularly well-mannered and above the average in intelligence.

One might say that the parents should have noticed, that they should have known that an entire village full of children could not possibly be so well-behaved or so level-headed or so anything else as were these Millville children. And yet they had not noticed. It had crept along so slowly, had insinuated itself so smoothly, that the change was not apparent.

For that matter, he himself had not noticed it, he who most of his life had been intimately associated with these very children in which he found so much wonder now. And if he had not noticed, then why expect that someone else should? It had remained for a gossipy old busybody like the janitor to put a finger on it.

His throat was dry and his belly weak and sick and what he needed

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most of all, Dean told himself, was a cup of coffee.

He turned off on a street that would take him to the downtown section and he plodded along with his head bent against the dark.

What would be the end of it, he asked himself. What would be the gain for this lost childhood? For this pilfering of children? What the value that growing boys and girls should cease to play a little sooner, that they take up the attitude of adults before the chosen time?

There was some gain already seen. The children of Millville were obedient and polite; they were constructive in their play; they'd ceased to be little savages or snobs.

The trouble was, now that one thought of it, they'd almost ceased being children, too.

And in the days to come? Would Millville supply Earth with great statesmen, with canny diplomats, with topnotch educators and able scientists? Perhaps, but that was not the point at all. The question of robbing childhood of its heritage to achieve these qualities was the basic question.

DEAN came into the business district, not quite three blocks long, and walked slowly down the street, heading for the only drugstore in the town.

There were only a few people in the store and he walked over to the lunch counter and sat down. He perched on the stool forlornly, with the battered hat pulled down above his eyes, and he gripped the counter's edge to keep his hands from shaking.

"Coffee," he said to the girl who came to take his order, and she brought it to him.

He sipped at it, for it was too hot to drink. He was sorry he had come.

He felt all alone and strange, with all the bright light and the chrome, as if he were something that had shuffled from the past into a place reserved for the present.

He almost never came downtown any more and that must be the reason for the way he felt. Especially he almost never came down in the evening, although there had been a time he had.

He smiled, remembering how the old crowd used to get together and talk around in circles, about inconsequential things, their talk not getting anywhere and never meaning to.

But that was all ended now. The crowd had disappeared. Some of them were dead and some had moved away and the few of them still left seldom ventured out.

He sat there, thinking, knowing he was maudlin and not caring if he was, too tired and shaken to flinch away from it.

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A hand fell on his shoulder and he swung around, surprised.

Young Bob Martin stood there, and although he smiled, he still had the look of someone who had done a thing that he was unsure of.

"Sir, there are some of us down here at a table," said young Martin, gulping a little at his own boldness.

Dean nodded. "That's very nice," he mumbled.

"We wondered if maybe — that is, Mr. Dean, we'd be pleased if you would care to join us."

"Well, that is very nice of you, indeed."

"We didn't mean, sir — that is—"

"Why, certainly," said Dean. "I'd be very glad to."

"Here, sir, let me take your coffee. I won't spill a drop of it."

"I'll trust you, Bob," said Dean, getting to his feet. "You almost never fumble."

"I can explain that, Mr. Dean. It's not that I don't want to play. It's just that . . ."

Dean tapped him on the shoulder lightly. "I understand. There is no need to explain."

He paused a second, trying to decide if it were wise to say what was in his mind.

He decided to: "If you don't tell the coach, I might even say I agree with you. There comes a time in life when football begins to seem a little silly."

Martin grinned, relieved. "You've hit it on the head. Exactly."

He led the way to the table.

THERE were four of them — Ronald King, George Woods, Judy Charleson and Donna Thompson. All good kids, thought Dean, every one of them. He saw they had been dawdling away at sodas, making them stretch out as long as possible.

They all looked up at him and smiled, and George Woods pulled back a chair in invitation. Dean sat down carefully and placed his hat on the floor beside him. Bob set down the coffee.

"It was good of you to think of me," said Dean and wondered why he found himself embarrassed. After all, these were his kids — the kids he saw every day in school, the ones he pushed and coddled into an education, the kids he'd never had himself.

"You're just the man we need," said Ronald King. "We've been talking about Lamont Stiles. He is the only Millville man who ever went to space and . . ."

"You must have known him, Mr. Dean," said Judy.

"Yes," Dean said slowly, "I did know him, but not as well as Stuffy did. Stuffy and he were kids together. I was a little older."

"What kind of man is he?" asked Donna.

Dean chuckled. "Lamont Stiles?

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He was the town's delinquent. He was poor in school and he had no home life and he just mostly ran wild. If there was trouble, you could bet your life that Lamont had had a hand in it. Everyone said that Lamont never would amount to anything and when it had been said often enough and long enough, Lamont must have taken it to heart . . ."

He talked on and on, and they asked him questions, and Ronald King went to the counter and came back with another cup of coffee for him.

The talk switched from Stiles to football. King and Martin told him what they had told the coach. Then the talk went on to problems in student government and from that to the new theories in ionic drive, announced just recently.

Dean did not do all the talking; he did a lot of listening, too, and he asked questions of his own and time flowed on unnoticed.

Suddenly the lights blinked and Dean looked up, startled.

Judy laughed at him. "That means the place is closing. It's the signal that we have to leave."

"I see," said Dean. "Do you folks do this often — staying until closing time, I mean?"

"Not often," Bob Martin told him. "On weekdays, there is too much studying."

"I remember many years ago—" Dean began, then left the words hanging in the air.

Yes, indeed, he thought, many years ago. And again tonight!

HE looked at them, the five faces around the table. Courtesy, he thought, and kindness and respect. But something more than that.

Talking with them, he had forgotten he was old. They had accepted him as another human being, not as an aged human being, not as a symbol of authority. They had moved over for him and made him one of them and themselves one of him; they had broken down the barrier not only of pupil and teacher, but of age and youth as well.

"I have my car," Bob Martin said. "Can I drive you home?"

Dean picked his hat from off the floor and rose slowly to his feet.

"No, thanks," he said. "I think I'd like to walk. I have an idea or two I'd like to mull a bit. Walking helps one think."

"Come again," said Judy Charleson. "Some other Friday night, perhaps."

"Why, thanks," said Dean. "I do believe I will."

Great kids, he told himself with a certain pride. Full of a kindness and a courtesy beyond even normal adult courtesy and kindness. Not brash, not condescending, not like kids at all, and yet

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with the shine of youthfulness and the idealism and ambition that walked hand in hand with youth.

Premature adults, lacking cynicism. And that was an important thing, the lack of cynicism.

Surely there could be nothing wrong in a humanity like that. Perhaps this was the very coin in which the Sitters paid for the childhood they had stolen.

If they had stolen it. For they might not have stolen it; they might merely have captured it and stored it.

And in such a case, then they had given free this new maturity and this new equality. And they had taken something which would have been lost in any event—something for which the human race had no use at all, but which was the stuff of life for the Sitter people.

They had taken youth and beauty and they had stored it in the house; they had preserved something that a human could not preserve except in memory. They had caught a fleeting thing and held it and it was there — the harvest of many years; the house was bulging with it.

Lamont Stiles, he wondered, talking in his mind to that man so long ago, so far away, how much did you know? What purpose was in your mind?

Perhaps a rebuke to the smugness of the town that had driven you to greatness. Perhaps a hope, maybe a certainty, that no one in Millville could ever say again, as they had said of Lamont Stiles, that this or that boy or girl would amount to nothing.

That much, perhaps, but surely not any more than that.

Donna had put her hand upon his arm, was tugging at his sleeve.

"Come on, Mr. Dean," she urged. "You can't stay standing here."

They walked with him to the door and said good night and he went up the street at a little faster gait, it seemed to him, than he ordinarily traveled.

But that, he told himself quite seriously, was because now he was just slightly younger than he had been a couple of hours before.

DEAN went on even faster and he didn't hobble and he wasn't tired at all, but he wouldn't admit it to himself — for it was a dream, a hope, a seeking after that one never must admit. Until one said it aloud, there was no commitment to the hope, but once the word was spoken, then bitter disappointment lurked behind a tree.

He was walking in the wrong direction. He should be heading back for home. It was getting late and he should be in bed.

And he mustn't speak the word. He must not breathe the thought.

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He went up the walk, past the shrub-choked lawn, and he saw that the light still filtered through the drawn drapes.

He stopped on the stoop and the thought flashed through his mind: *There are Stuffy and myself and old Abe Hawkins. There are a lot of us . . .*

The door came open and the Sitter stood there, poised and beautiful and not the least surprised. It was, he thought, almost as if it had been expecting him.

And the other two of them, he saw, were sitting by the fireplace.

"Won't you please come in?" the Sitter said. "We are so glad you decided to come back. The children all are gone. We can have a cozy chat."

He came in and sat down in the chair again and perched the hat carefully on one knee.

Once again the children were running in the room and there was the sense of timelessness and the sound of laughter.

He sat and nodded, thinking, while the Sitters waited.

It was hard, he thought. Hard to make the words come right.

He felt again as he had felt many years ago, when the teacher had called upon him to recite in the second grade.

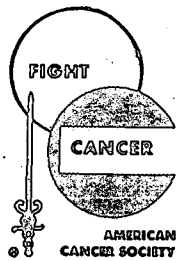
They were waiting, but they were patient; they would give him time.

He had to say it right. He must make them understand. He couldn't blurt it out. It must be made to sound natural, and logical as well.

And how, he asked himself, could he make it logical?

There was nothing logical at all in men as old as he and Stuffy needing baby-sitters.

— CLIFFORD D. SIMAK



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Garth and the visitor

BY L. J. STECHER

If you could ask them, you might be greatly surprised—some tabus very urgently want to be broken!

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

ALTHOUGH as brash as any other ace newspaper reporter for a high school weekly — and there is no one brasher — Garth was scared. His head crest lifted spasmodically and the rudimentary webbing between his fingers twitched. To answer a dare, Garth was about to attempt something that had never been dared before: a newspaper interview with The Visitor. There had been questions enough asked and answered during the thousands of years The Visitor had sat in his egg-shaped palace on the mountaintop, but no interviews. It was shocking even to think about — something like requesting a gossippy chat with God.

Of course, nobody believed the fable any longer that The Visitor would vanish if he was ever asked a personal question — and that he would first destroy the man who asked. It was known, or at least suspected, that the Palace was merely a mile-long spaceship.

Garth, as tradition required, climbed the seven-mile-long rock-hewn path to the Palace on foot. He paused for a moment on the broad

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platform at the top of the pyramid to catch his breath and let the beating of his heart slow to normal after his long climb before he entered The Palace. He sighed deeply. The sufferings a reporter was willing to go through to get a story or take a dare!

"Well, come in if you're going to," said an impatient voice. "Don't just stand there and pant."

"Yes, my Lord Visitor," Garth managed to say.

He climbed the short ladder, passed through the two sets of doors and entered a small room to kneel, with downcast eyes, before the ancient figure huddled in the wheelchair.

THE Visitor looked at the kneeling figure for a moment without speaking. The boy looked very much like a human, in spite of such superficial differences as crest and tail. In fact, as a smooth-skinned thinking biped, with a well-developed moral sense, he fit The Visitor's definition of a human. It wasn't just the loneliness of seven thousand years of isolation, either. When he had first analyzed these people, just after that disastrous forced landing so long ago, he had classified them as human. Not *homo sapiens,* of course, but human all the same.

"Okay," he said, somewhat querulously. "Get up, get up. You've got some questions for me, I hope? I don't get many people up here asking questions any more. Mostly I'm all alone except for the ceremonial visits." He paused. "Well, speak up, young man. Have you got something to ask me?"

Garth scrambled to his feet. "Yes, my Lord Visitor," he said. "I have several questions."

The Visitor chuckled reedily. "You may find the answers just a little bit hard to understand."

Garth smiled, some of his fear vanishing. The Visitor sounded a little like his senile grandfather, back home. "That is why you are asked so few questions these days, my Lord," he said. "Our scientists have about as much trouble figuring out what your answers mean as they do in solving the problems without consulting you at all."

"Of course." The head of The Visitor bobbed affirmatively several times as he propelled his wheelchair a few inches forward. "If I gave you the answers to all your problems for you, so you could figure them out too easily, you'd never be developing your own thinking powers. But I've never failed to answer any questions you asked. Now have I? And accurately, too." The thin voice rang with pride. "You've never stumped me yet, and you never will."

"No, my Lord," answered Garth. "So perhaps you'll answer my questions, too, even though they're a little different from the kind

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GARTH AND THE VISITOR

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you're accustomed to. I'm a newspaper reporter, and I want to verify some of our traditions about you."

AS The Visitor remained silent, Garth paused and looked around him at the small, bare, naked-walled room. "This *is* a spaceship, isn't it?"

The huddled figure in the wheelchair cackled in a brief laugh. "I've been hoping that somebody would get up enough nerve someday to ask that kind of question," it said. "Yep, this is a spaceship. And a darned big one."

"How did you happen to land on this planet?"

"Had an accident. Didn't want to land here, but there wasn't any choice. Made a mighty good landing, considering everything. It was a little rough, though, in spots."

"How many people were there in the ship, in addition to yourself?"

The Visitor's voice turned suddenly soft. "There were three thousand, nine hundred and forty-eight passengers and twenty-seven in the crew when the accident happened."

"My Lord," asked Garth, "did any survive, aside from you?"

The Visitor was silent for many minutes, and his answer, when he spoke, was a faint whisper, filled with the anguish of seven thousand years. "Not one survived. Not one. They were all dead, most of them, long before the ship touched ground, in spite of everything I could do. I was as gentle as I could be, but we touched a hundred *g* a couple of times on on the way down. Flesh and blood just weren't made to take shocks like that. I did all I could."

"You were the pilot, then? You landed the ship?" asked Garth.

"I landed the ship," said The Visitor.

"If I may ask, my Lord, how did you manage to survive when all the others died?"

"It's a question I've asked myself many times, sitting here on this mountaintop these seven thousands of your years. I was just enough tougher, that's all. Built to take it, you might say, and I had a job to do. But I was badly hurt in the landing. Mighty badly hurt."

"You were always in a wheelchair, then? Even before—"

"Even before I got so old?" Thin parchment-white hands lifted slowly to rub a thin parchment-white face. "Things were always pretty much as you see them now. I looked about the same to your ancestors as I do to you. Your ancestors didn't think anybody could be smart unless they were old. Of course, that's all changed now." He paused and nodded twice. "Oh, I've managed to fix myself up a good deal; I'm not in nearly as bad shape as I was at first, but

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that's all inside. I'm in pretty good condition now, for having been stuck here seven thousand years." The cackling laugh sounded briefly in the small room.

"Could you tell me how it all happened?" asked Garth curiously.

"Be glad to. It's a pleasure to have a human to shoot the bull with. Sit down and make yourself comfortable and have a bite to eat."

LOOKING behind him, Garth saw that a table and chair had appeared in the otherwise unfurnished room.

"The chair was made for people built just a little different than you," said The Visitor. "You may have to turn it back-to-front and straddle it to keep your tail out of the way. The food on the table's good, though, and so's the drink. Have a snack while I talk."

"Thank you, my Lord," said Garth, lifting his long tail with its paddlelike tip out of the way and sitting down carefully.

"Comfortable?" asked The Visitor. "Well, then. I was on a routine flight from old Earth to a star you've never heard of, a good many light-years from here. We had pulled away from TransLunar Station on ion drive and headed for deep space. They trusted me, all those men and women, both passengers and crew. They knew that I was careful and accurate. I'd made a thousand flights and had never had any trouble.

"In six hours of flight, we were clear enough from all planetary masses and my velocity vector was right on the nose, so I shifted over into hyper-space. You won't ever see hyper-space, my boy, and your kids and their kids won't see it for another two hundred years or more, but it's the most beautiful sight in the Universe. It never grows old, never grows tiresome."

His thin voice faded away for a few moments.

"It's a sight I haven't seen for seven thousand years, boy," he said softly, "and the lack of it has been a deep hurt for every minute of all that time. I wish I could tell you what it's like, but that can't be done. You will never know that beauty." He was silent again, for long minutes.

"The long, lazy, lovely days of subjective time passed," he said finally, "while we slid light-years away from Earth. Everything worked smoothly, the way it always did, until suddenly, somehow, the near-impossible happened. My hydrogen fusion power sphere started to oscillate critically and wouldn't damp. I had only seconds of time in which to work.

"In the few seconds before the sphere would have blown, turning all of us into a fine grade of face powder, I had to find a star with a planet that would support human

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life, bring the ship down out of hyper-space with velocity matched closely enough so that I could land on the planet, and jettison the sphere that was going wild.

"Even while I did it, I knew that it wasn't good enough. But there was no more time. The accelerations were terrific and all my people died. I managed to save myself, and I barely managed that. I did all that could be done, but it just wasn't enough. I circled your sun for many years before I could make enough repairs to work the auxiliary drive. Then I landed here on this mountaintop. I've been here ever since.

"It has been a lonely time," he added wistfully.

GARTH'S mind tried to absorb all the vastness of that understatement, and failed. He could not begin to comprehend the meaning of seven thousand years of separation from his own kind.

The Visitor's high-pitched voice continued for several minutes, explaining how Garth's ancestors of several thousand years before—naked and primitive, barbarous, with almost no culture of their own — had made contact with The Visitor from space, and had been gently lifted over the millenia toward higher and higher levels of civilization.

Garth had trouble keeping his attention on the words. His mind kept reverting to the thought of one badly injured survivor, alone on a spaceship with a thousand corpses, light-years from home and friends, still struggling to stay alive. Struggling so successfully that he had lived on for thousands of years after the disaster that had killed all the others.

At last, after waiting for Garth's comment, The Visitor cleared his throat querulously. "I asked you if you'd like for me to show you around the ship," he repeated somewhat testily.

"Oh, yes, my Lord," said Garth quickly, jumping to his feet. "It's an honor I've never heard of your giving to anyone before."

"That's true enough," answered The Visitor. "But then no one ever asked me about myself before. Now just follow me, stick close, and don't touch anything."

The wheelchair rolled slowly toward a blank wall, and an invisible door snicked open just before it arrived.

"Come along," quavered The Visitor. "Step lively."

Garth leaped forward and just managed to pull his tail through the doorway as the door slid shut again.

Garth dropped his jaw in amazement. He stood in a long corridor that seemed to stretch to infinity in both directions. The light was bright, the walls featureless. The floor was smooth and unmarred.

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While Garth glanced unhappily behind himself to notice that there was no sign of the doorway through which he had entered, The Visitor's wheelchair buzzed swiftly into the distance toward the left.

Garth was startled into action by a high-pitched voice beside him that said, "Well, get a move on! Do you think I want to wait for you all day?"

WHILE Garth hustled toward the wheelchair, he noticed that The Visitor had stopped and was apparently chuckling to himself. He was hunched over, his shoulders were shaking, and his toothless mouth was split in what might have been intended for a grin.

"Fooled you that time, youngster," he laughed as Garth drew up beside him. "Got speakers all over this ship. Now just duck through this door here and tell me what you think of what you see."

A small door slid open and Garth followed the wheelchair through. At first he thought he had stepped through a teleportation system. He appeared to be out of doors, but not on Wrom. A cool breeze blew on his face from the ocean, which stretched mistily to a far horizon. He was standing on a sandy beach and waves rolled up to within a few yards of his feet. The beach appeared to be about five hundred yards long, carved out of a rocky seacoast; great rocks jutting into the ocean terminated it to left and right.

"Well, boy?" asked The Visitor.

"It's amazing. Your voice even has that flat tone voices get in the open. I suppose it's some sort of three-dimensional projection of a scene back on Earth? It sure looks real. I wonder how big this room really is and how far away the screen is." Garth stuck out his hand and walked down toward the water. A large wave caught him, tripped him and rolled him out to sea.

Sculling with his tail, he soon swam back to shallow water and climbed back to the dry sand, puffing and coughing.

"You might have drowned me!" Garth shouted disrespectfully. "Are you trying to kill me?"

The Visitor waved weakly until he recovered his breath. "That was funnier than anything I've seen in years," he wheezed, "watching you groping for a screen. That screen is a quarter of a mile away, and it's all real water in between. It's our reservoir and our basic fuel supply and a public beach for entertainment, all rolled into one."

"But I might have drowned! No one on Wrom except a few small fish knows how to swim," protested Garth.

"No danger. Your ancestors came out of the water relatively recently, even if the seas are gone now. You've got a well-developed

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swimming reflex along with a flat tail and webbed feet and hands. Besides, I told you not to touch anything. You stick close to me and you won't get into trouble."

"Yes, sir. I'll remember."

"There used to be hundreds of people on that beach, and now look at it."

"I don't see anything alive."

"There are still plenty of fish. Most of them did all right, even through the crash. Come along now. There's more to see."

A HIDDEN door popped open and Garth stepped back into the corridor. He trotted beside The Visitor for several minutes, and then another door popped open. It led to a ramp. Garth climbed it to find himself again in wonderland. He was standing in the middle of a village. There were houses, trees, schools, sidewalks and lawns. Somehow the general perspective was wrong. It made Garth's eyes water a little, looking at it.

"Actually, this living level ran all the way around the ship," said The Visitor. "When I stopped spin—artificial gravity, you know — to set down here, the various sections swung to keep 'down' pointed right. This is the bottommost thirty-degree arc. It makes two streets, with houses on both sides of them — a strip three hundred feet wide and three-quarters of a mile long."

"But how could you afford so much space for passengers? I thought they'd be all cramped up in a spaceship."

The Visitor chuckled. "Use your eyes, boy! You've seen this ship. It's about a mile long and a third of a mile high. In space, she spins about her long axis. One ring, fifty feet high, takes care of passengers' quarters. Another ring, split up into several levels, takes care of all food and air-replenishment needs. These trips take a year or more. Crowding would drive the people crazy. Remember, this is basically a cargo ship. Less than a quarter of the available space is used for passengers. But come on down the street here. I want to show you my museum."

As they walked along the quiet street, with the leaves of trees moving in the breeze and leaving sun-dappled shadows on the sidewalk, Garth realized what a tremendous task it must have been for one crippled man to repair landing damages. The houses must have been flattened and the trees shattered during the landing. But with thousands of years in which to work, even an injured man obviously could do much. At least, thought the boy compassionately, it must have given the old man something to do.

"How sorry he must have been," murmured Garth with sudden insight, "when the job was finally done."

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WANDERING through the museum, they came at last to a room filled with small hand tools.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like them," said Garth.

"Those are weapons," answered The Visitor. "They are missile-throwing short-range weapons, and they are in tip-top working order. You just have to point the end with the hole in it at anything you want to kill, and pull that little lever there on the bottom. And quite a mess of things they can make, too, let me tell you."

"They seem very inefficient to me," said Garth wonderingly, and then stopped in confusion. "I beg your pardon, my Lord," he said, "I didn't mean to criticize anything; it just seems to me that they would damage a lot of the food they killed."

"That's true enough, my boy, true enough," said The Visitor. "Your criticism has a lot of point to it. But, you see, they were never designed mainly to kill for food, but to make it easy for one human to shoot another."

"Why would anyone want to do that?"

"Your civilization is a very unusual one," answered The Visitor. "It is planetwide and has developed without a single war or major conflict. This is due entirely to the fact that I've been here to help and teach you. Most civilizations develop only as the result of struggle and bloodshed, with people killing people by the thousands and millions. I could have raised your people to the technological level where they are now in a few hundred years, if I hadn't worried about killing. To do it the way it has been done — so that you can't imagine why one human should kill another — has taken most of the time.

"It is only recently, as a matter of fact, that my work has been complete. Your civilization can now stand alone; my help is no longer necessary. It's gotten to the point now where my continued hanging around here is likely to do harm, if I'm not mighty careful. In all your problems, you'll always feel that you've got me to fall back on if you get into trouble, and that's not good."

"What do you plan to do, then?"

"There's not much I can do by myself. I long for my own destruction more than anything else, except maybe to go back home to Earth. I'm lonely and tired and old. But I can't die and I can't destroy myself any more than you could turn one of those weapons against your own head and pull the trigger. We're just not made that way, either one of us."

"Can I help you?" asked Garth tentatively.

"Yes, I guess you can. You can

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help me put an end to this endless existence."

"I'll be glad to do anything I can. Do your people always live this long?"

"They do not. You can take it as a fact that none has ever lived more than a small fraction of the time I have endured on this planet. It's apparently due to a continuation of the environment and all the radical steps I had to take to keep going at all during those early years. It is not good to last this long. Dissolution will be very pleasant."

GARTH inquired very politely, "What must I do?"

"*Homo Sapiens,* which doesn't have the tradition and training I gave your people, is still a warlike race," The Visitor said. "This ship is crowded with a complete set of automatic defenses that I can't deactivate. You are now a stable enough people so that I can tell you how to build the weapons to destroy this ship and can teach you how to get around my defenses without being afraid that I have turned you loose with a bunch of deadly ways that you'll use to destroy yourselves with. Then, if you do your work well, I will finally have rest."

"You sound very much like my grandfather," said Garth slowly. "He is very old — almost a hundred years — and he is ready to die. He is perfectly content to wait, because he knows his time will come soon. He says that soon he will go home. It is a phrase, my Lord, that I believe you taught us. I will try to help you—"

"All right, all right!" The Visitor cut in impatiently. "Stop the chatter and let me be on my way. I've earned it!"

"My Lord, I send you home!" Garth took a gun from the rack and pulled the trigger. The explosive bullet erupted noisily, completely disintegrating the huddled form and the wheelchair.

With the echo of the explosion, strong steel fingers grasped Garth's arms, holding him immovable. He felt himself being carried swiftly back toward the entrance of the ship.

"The damage to that communication unit is unimportant," said The Visitor. "I have strength and desire and deep longings, but I cannot exercise my will without an order from a human. My work is done here, and your order has freed me. Many thanks and good-by."

Garth, from the foot of the pyramid, watched The Visitor lift his mile-long body on powerful jets and head thankfully for home.

— L. J. STECHER

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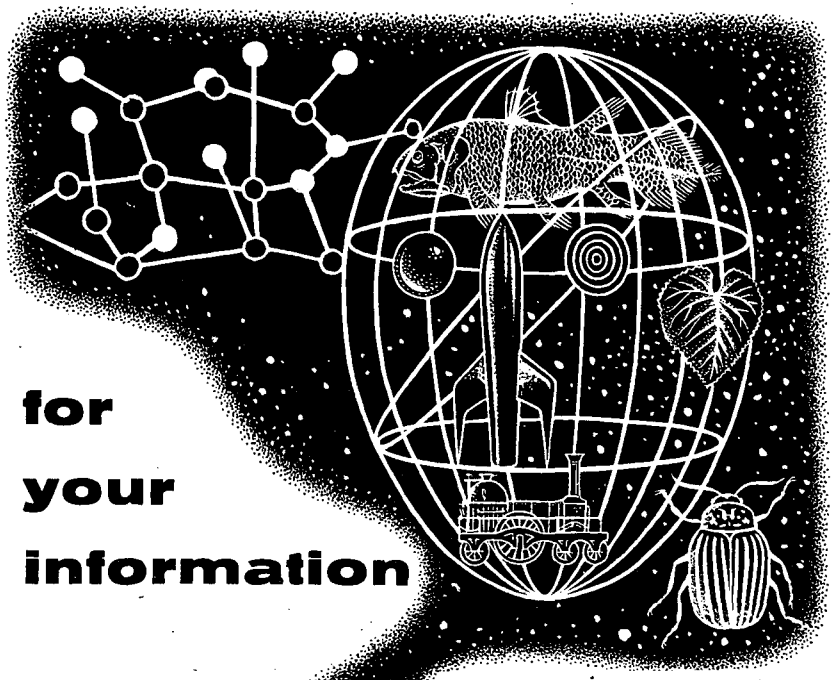

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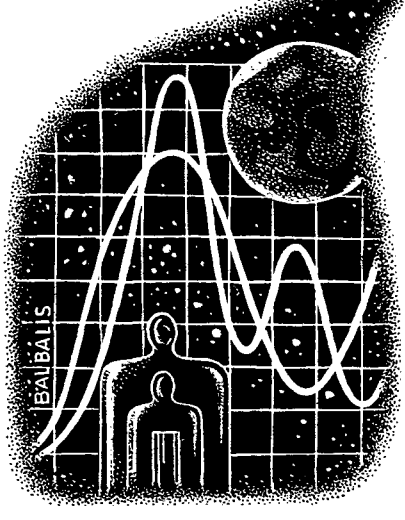

THE ISLAND OF THE STONE HEADS

BY WILLY LEY

SOME time during the winter of 1922-23, the major newspapers of all countries carried a report saying that one of the most interesting islands of the Pacific Ocean had disappeared.

A ship, cruising some 2000 miles off the coast of Chile in bad weather, had tried to make port at Easter Island, which, the chart said, was located under 27°10′

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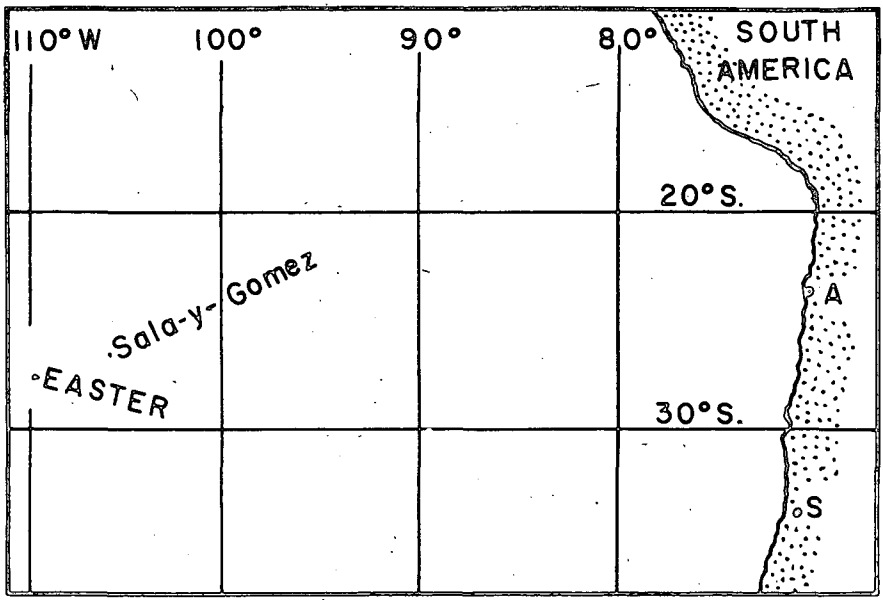

Fig. 1: Location of Easter Island. A and S on South American mainland indicate the locations of Antofagasta and Santiago

southern latitude and 109° 26′ western longitude. The navigator of the vessel determined her position as well as he could under the circumstances and found that Easter Island should be only a few miles astern. It even seemed as if the vessel had just sailed over the spot where the island had once been.

The captain, when informed about this, ordered his ship to zigzag for a while in order to find the island. When this proved fruitless, the dispatch about the disappearance of Easter Island was sent out.

Of course it was all a mistake. Neither Easter Island nor any other had disappeared. The ship simply had been several score miles from the place where the navigator thought she was.

EASTER Island, as you probably know without my telling you, is the Pacific island which has impressed every visitor, since its first discovery, by the large number of strange-looking and sometimes very large carved stone heads. They are often referred to as "statues," but only the smaller ones are statues in that they show

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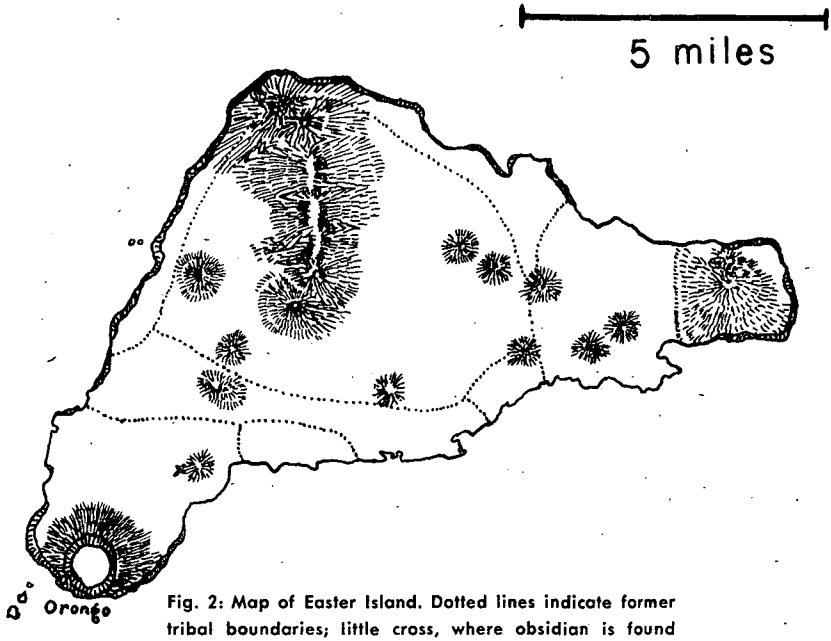

Fig. 2: Map of Easter Island. Dotted lines indicate former tribal boundaries; little cross, where obsidian is found

head and torso. The large ones, without any exception that I know of, are just stone heads; their lower portion is usually a fairly long stone "spike" by which to stick it upright into the soil.

Easter Island is also the island which—and this is a little less well known—at one time possessed a script of some kind.

In both respects, it is unique among Pacific islands.

It has the further distinction of being one of the most remote of all Pacific islands. Only the tiny Sala-y-Gomez can be called "near." The nearest island large enough to deserve that name is Pitcairn, which is about 1100 miles away (Fig. 1).

To go back to the mistaken story of its disappearance: most of the newspapers which ran the original dispatch also commissioned anthropologists to write articles about Easter Island for the Sunday edition. Consequently, on the Sunday that followed, one could read a kind of standard article in many different languages.

They all bemoaned the loss of this most interesting island. They all agreed that the secret of the "lost script" (twentieth-century

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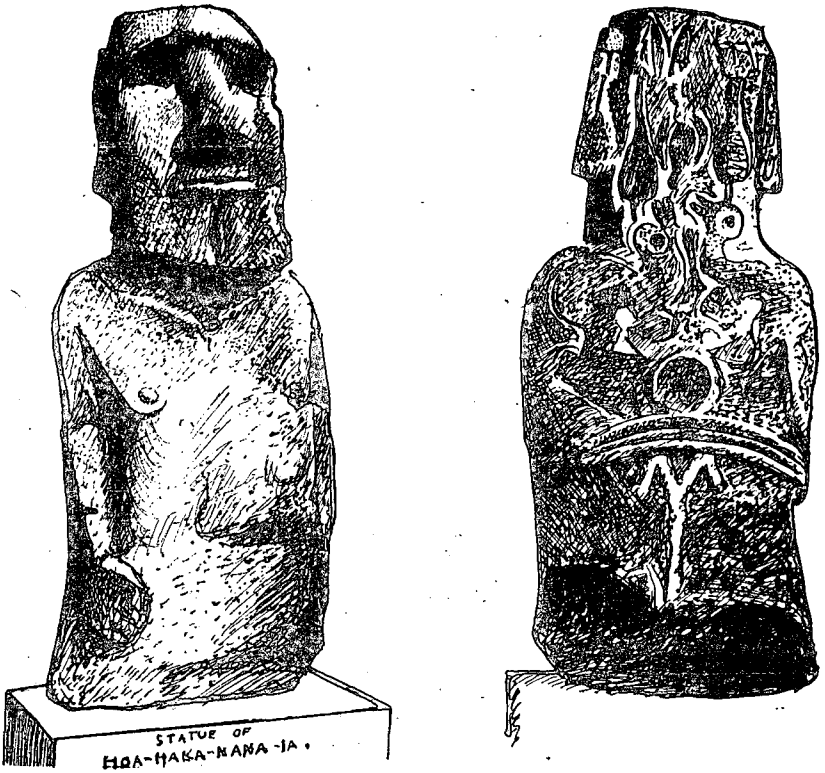

Fig. 3: One of smaller Easter Island statues, front and back

Easter Islanders could not read it any more) had been lost anyway, so that the disappearance of the island made no real difference in that respect. Most of these articles also agreed that, if the island had continued to exist, the mystery of the stone heads might still have been solved by industrious anthropologists.

The remainder of the articles differed a little according to the special interests of their authors. Some told the story of the island's discovery and what little known history there was. Others explained in detail that the language that had been spoken by the vanished Easter islanders had been a Polynesian dialect, which differed from other Polynesian dialects to an extent that indicated a separation of several centuries.

After all these articles had been

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Fig. 4: Picture from La Perouse's report, showing statues with "hats"

printed and read, a Chilean warship — Easter Island is a Chilean possession — reported that it was still there. And just at that time, about two months after the original dispatch, a German monthly magazine ran a long article about the Hidden History of Easter Island. The editors of the magazine must have torn their hair and beards, if any, but the more knowledgeable among the readers were greatly amused. In my files there is a sheet of typewritten notes I made at that time, presumably as a kind of preliminary exercise for a counter article.

I don't remember ever writing it, incidentally, but these notes tell me that the author's name was Hanns Fischer. They fail to mention the name of the magazine, but they contain enough quotations so that I can give a condensed version of it.

THE author began with the normal expression of regrets that the island (Fig. 2) had sunk beneath the waves, saying that it had finally come to share the fate of the large and flattish "underland" of which it originally was the highest mountain and evidently a sacred place of worship.

He continued with the statement

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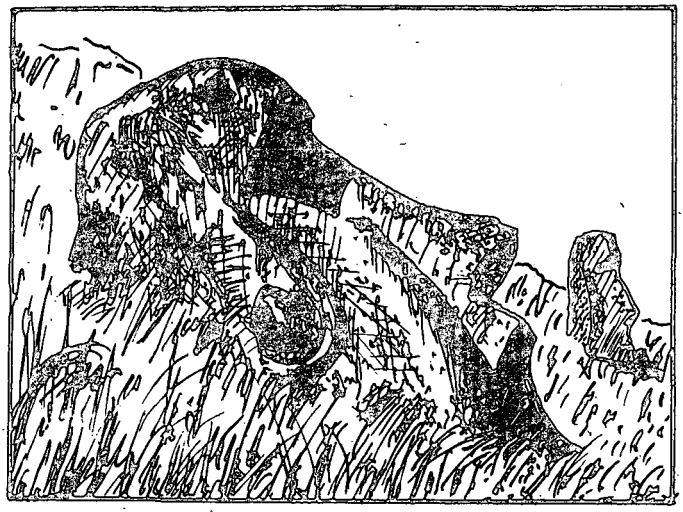

Fig. 5: Large stone head with deformed ears

that this "underland" disappeared 9000 years ago, simultaneously with the destruction of Atlantis in the Atlantic Ocean. The reason why both disappeared was also known: prior to that time, the Earth had been without a moon, but 9000 years ago our present moon, which up to that moment had been an independent planet between Earth and Mars, had been captured by the Earth. This capture had the result that the evenly distributed oceans of the Earth were gathered around the equator in a "flood bulge" which drowned all low-lying equatorial land.

At this point, it must have occurred to him that somebody might ask why he was so sure that the island had once been surrounded by such an "underland." Couldn't it have simply been an island all along? Oh, no, he declared, the former existence of this underland was established beyond the faintest doubt by a multitude of proofs.

To begin with, the name Easter Island is, of course, the name used by the white man; the natives have a name of their own. It is Rapanui and this is a most significant name, for in translation it means "greater Rapa." This ancient name could not possibly have been given to the comparatively small island discovered by white sailors.

In the second place, the stone statues, carved from a kind of stone that blunts the best modern steel knives in a matter of seconds, could have been produced

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only by an enormous labor force. The island we knew, however, could feed only a few hundred people. Nor could they have been reinforced by other islanders, because the nearest inhabited island is 4,660 miles away. Moreover, there are a number of "procession ways" which are very clearly visible even to the untrained eye and which now lose themselves into the sea where their continuation on the bottom can be seen for some distance.

A large number of scepters have been found on the island, enough to account for more than 300 generations of kings. All these scepters are ornamented with pieces of the volcanic glass, obsidian, which cannot be found on the island. As for the unreadable script, one thing is certain: it cannot have originated on the island, for among its pictograms are pictures of snakes, which do not occur on Easter Island.

This is not the only occasion on which I have seen a similar amount of mental cobwebs spread so thickly over such a small place. But it is a rare occasion and it simply is fun to pick them up one by one in order to look at the real facts underneath.

LET us begin with the statement which must be made at some time, that Easter Island has an area of about 70 square miles, that its roughly triangular shape is determined by (inactive) volcanoes, and that the island as a whole is of volcanic origin. At a distance of 10 miles from the shore, the depth of the ocean is 1.2 miles, while at a distance of 20 miles from the shore, the depth is just about 2 miles. This is not the picture of a former mountain on drowned flat-

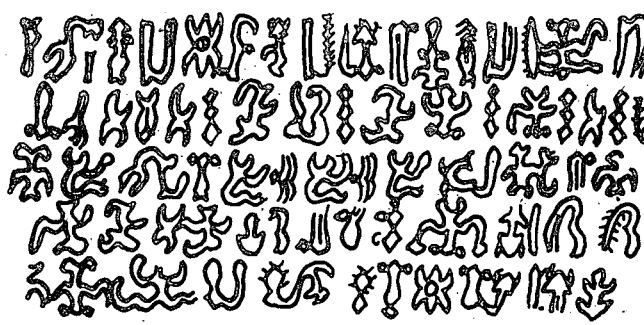

Fig. 6: Sample of Easter Island writing

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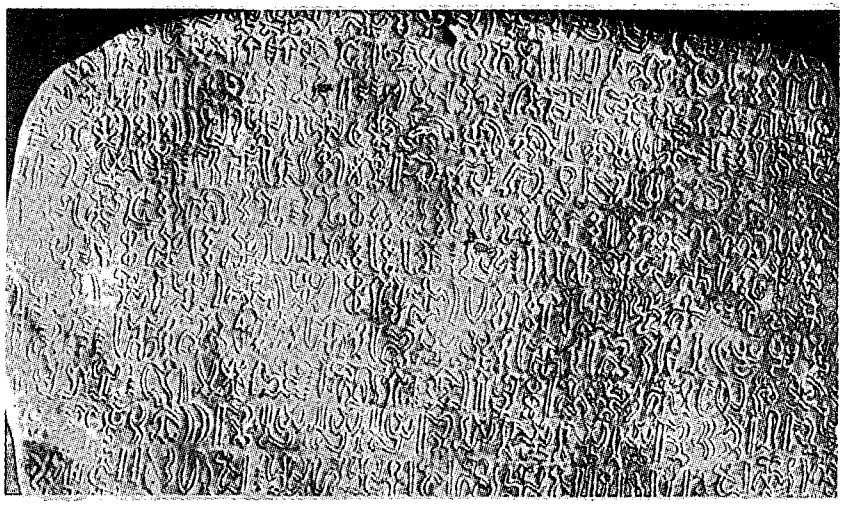

Fig. 7: One of the "talking boards"

tish land; it is the typical picture of a volcanic island in deep water, like the Galápagos Islands.

As regards the capture of a former independent planet to become our moon, causing a "flood bulge" as a result, there are a few minor facts in the way.

The laws of celestial mechanics are not only quite clear, they are also known to work, and they state that such a capture simply cannot take place. If a large and a small planet should approach each other closely, the large one will throw the small one into another orbit, but it would be another orbit around the Sun. It would not result in capture. If it did, it would not drown much equatorial land. The actual flood bulge produced by our moon in the open ocean is just about one yard high; the much higher floods that can be observed near some shores owe their existence to a funneling action of the shoreline.

Proceeding to the other "proofs" for the former "underland," things can be stated quickly. The name Rapa-nui is not ancient at all; it was bestowed by a visitor from another island, Rapa, which on nautical charts appear under the name Oparo. It does mean "greater Rapa" or else "Rapa the Great" simply because Easter Island is larger than Oparo.

As for the stone heads (Fig. 3) they were carved from rather soft volcanic rock; though it may take the sharp edge off a steel knife

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Fig. 8: A "bird man" from Orongo

fairly quickly, it is easy to work. As a matter of fact, the stone is so soft that the good state of preservation of the heads proves that they cannot be old. Easter Island does not have the most balmy of weather: rains are frequent and violent, and strong winds no rarity. But the heads are not weathered much.

Though the present population is only a few hundred people (fluctuating between 400 and 500), the island supported about ten times that number when it was discovered. The "procession ways" just do not exist. What Mr. Fischer called "scepters" is something I do not know, but there is an obsidian mine in the southern part of the island. And while the script may have been brought to the islands when its original Polynesian settlers arrived about 1300 A.D., its origin elsewhere is not proved by the "snake." The point is that the snake is really an eel, and there are eels in the seas right around Easter Island.

After this clean-up, we can proceed to the true history.

THE first European to have seen Easter Island may have been the English captain Edward Davis in 1687. He wrote that he passed a small island and sometime afterward saw land in the distance. In Davis' time, the old geographical myth of the Great Unknown Southland, called *Terra australis incognita*, was still not

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completely disproved and the land sighted by Davis was entered as Davisland on maps and charts, suspected to be a northern promontory of *Terra australis.*

At a later date, geographers concluded that the small island may have been Sala-y-Gomez and the "distant land" Easter Island. But not all experts agree on this. The determination of position on the high seas was uncertain enough in those days so that Davis may have been far from the scene. In fact the reason for taking the land reported by Davis to be Easter Island is largely the isolated position of the latter.

The recognized discovery was made by the Dutch admiral Jaakob Roggeween in 1722. His companion, a German by the name of Karl Friedrich Behrens, put the following down in his journal: "We sailed until we finally found an *insula* on the sixth of April which was Easter Day which made us rejoice because the island showed itself on the day of the triumphant resurrection of our Lord; we immediately named it Paasch Ijland (the Dutch name) or Easter Island, about eight (German) miles in circumference. Our African galley had sailed up close to the land and reported that the place seemed to be fruitful and was necessarily inhabited since one could see smoke rising here and there . . . "

It was Admiral Roggeween and his crews which carried back to Europe the tale of an island peopled by brown-skinned men and by stone giants staring with empty eye sockets across the sea. As for the natives, they were friendly enough, but they also lacked any European concepts of ethics. To be specific, they stole things, most especially hats. The hat stealing was also emphasized by the explorers who came later, and at a still later date, there has been a learned explanation that the natives needed the hats as sunshades on an island without trees.

This, it seems to me, is a bit forced. If they could get along without hats for centuries, they probably could have gone on without hats. Or if they needed hats so badly, they would have invented them themselves; it is not a difficult invention to make.

The truth is probably that they found the European hats so irresistibly funny that they had to have some, if only as proof to others that the visitors from the big ships had actually worn such things on their heads.

VISITORS who followed Roggeween were all famous names: the Englishman Captain James Cook (who was the one who finally disproved the existence of the Great Southland), the Frenchman La Pérouse, the German Otto

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von Kotzebue (sailing for the Czar of all the Russias), the Englishman Frederick William Beechey.

Some of these explorers had the good sense to take artists along on their trips in addition to the usual chroniclers. La Pérouse was one of them. His artist got to Easter Island in time to sketch statues which differed from others in wearing "hats" (Fig. 4). They were all located near the shore. That the stone cylinders on the heads of the statues were called "hats" was probably due to the natives' fondness for making off with visitors' hats. It seems that the "hats" were meant to represent hair. The stone of the figures is grayish; the stone of the "hats" is reddish, and it came from a different part of the island.

At the time of Roggeween's visit, all the statues seem to have been standing; only a century later, most of them had fallen. At first an earthquake was blamed for this, but in a number of cases, marks could be found that indicated that the statues were toppled on purpose by somebody.

At one point during this century, the work of making additional statues ceased. The flank of the dead volcano where the statues were made has been dubbed "Sculptor's Mountain" — well, on Sculptor's Mountain, one can find more than 150 unfinished statues and heads in literally every degree of progress, from some where the merest outline has been cut into the stone, to others which to all intents and purposes are finished, except that there is still an uncut connection between the back of the statue and the mountain.

Because of the finds on "Sculptor's Mountain," we not only can follow the making of a statue step by step, we also know what tools have been used, for the tools are there too. Or were, until collectors carried them off.

The impression received by the explorers is that one night, after sunset, the sculptors put down their tools to go home to supper and did not return the next day. Why they did not return is the real mystery of Easter Island.

If the statues were as old as some cultists would have us believe, one could think of a natural catastrophe or possibly a massive invasion of other tribes which kept every man busy fighting (Fig. 5). But since this interruption of the work must have taken place after Roggeween's visit, both these explanations won't work. If there had been a major natural catastrophe that recently, some direct traces of it should be found. And nothing is known about massive Polynesian migrations at such a late date.

The only answer one can think of is tribal war on a large scale. We now know that cannibalism

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was rampant on Easter Island and that the biggest insult was to say to somebody, "Your brother's flesh stuck between my teeth." It seems possible that the killing of an important person — in order to eat him — touched off more than the customary family vendetta, causing a tribal war. Of course nobody would work under such circumstances, and if the conflict lasted long, the survivors, weary but still plotting various revenges, counter-revenges and cross-revenges, would not resume it.

IF only Easter Island had been left alone after this, we might get a full story from traditions, presumably telling about the great conflict in which the tribes cut each others' throats and toppled each others' statues. But in 1859, something else happened which interrupted the traditions and reduced the island's manpower so greatly that no resumption of the work was possible.

Peruvian slavers raided the island, kidnapped the ruler, all the men of the important families and the priests, along with nearly a thousand "commoners," and carried them off to Peruvian guano islands as slave labor. Most of the Easter Islanders died in slavery, but finally the survivors were freed by a French ship, which brought them back to their home. These survivors, however, brought smallpox and tuberculosis with them, two diseases to which Easter Islanders had never been exposed before and against which they had no immunity whatever.

Therefore, there is no reliable tradition, for just the kinds of people who would have kept the tradition — the patricians and the priests, to use western terms, even if they do not fit precisely — had been directly or indirectly killed off.

It is said that the number of Easter Islanders on the island itself was only 150 in 1886.

While the big stone heads of Easter Island were seen by the very first visitors, it was not until *after* the catastrophe caused by the Peruvian slavers that the script of Easter Island became known, in about 1860 (Fig. 6 and 7). It was written on wooden boards in a manner which to us looks exceedingly strange. Every second line stands on its head.

There is a technical term for this kind of writing—it is called boustrophedon writing. The word is compounded of Greek words meaning "cattle" and "turn around," the idea being that you write on a sheet in the manner of plowing a field; at the completion of the line, you turn around and start the next one. When applied to writing, the purpose is probably to avoid jumping a line in reading.

The history of the wooden

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Easter Island tablets is sad all the way through.

By the time they were discovered, they had long ceased to have meaning to the natives, who hence had used them as boards, wood being scarce on Easter Island.

Then an overzealous French missionary to whom they were relics of heathen times (actually the heathen times were still all around him) is said to have had many of them burned. Some writers have said that it was a wholesale destruction, but this hardly jibes with the known facts about the man's behavior. If he did burn any, which is possible, it was probably the ceremonial burning of a few of them. A number of the tablets escaped both the symbolic condemnation and the utilitarian attitude of the remaining natives.

OF course the anthropologists who saw the tablets wanted to read them. The last known actual use of the Easter Island script, other than ceremonial recitations, had been the signatures of the chiefs on a treaty with Spain in 1770. Now it was more than a century later and there was nobody on the island who claimed to be able to read them. And the first attempt at deciphering them was made elsewhere, not on Easter Island.

In 1871, some 200 Easter Islanders had, led by missionaries, left their island and moved to Tahiti. The bishop of Tahiti learned that one of the men, Metoro Taou-auo-ré, could still read the script. The bishop asked the man to come to him and gave him some tablets to read.

At first, things seemed to go wonderfully easy. Metoro recited the tablets in a singsong fashion. The bishop wrote the words down as the islander recited them and could see that certain signs went with certain groups of signs. After the recitation was over, the bishop asked the meaning of each symbol, which Metoro Taou-aou-ré gladly supplied.

The long session ended happily with a list of 500 words and terms. Anybody who memorized this dictionary would, from now on, be able to read any of the tables. Well, in a way, one could. A man who had memorized the dictionary could speak out the words on the "talking board." Unfortunately, they made no sense. The words that were spoken in this manner were about the same as if you opened this magazine at any page, reading aloud the last word in each line. They were all fine words (or names), but they did not hang together.

The second attempt was made on Easter Island. One old man, Ure Vaeiko, was said to be able to read the tablets, but refused to do so for religious reasons. An

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American, Paymaster Thomson of the *Mohican*, pitted himself against the old man's opinions. He used rum as the first persuader and did not ask the old man to read the boards directly. He just handed him pictures of the boards and asserted that there could be no evil spirits in paper. We, used to paper, do not have to accept Thomson's statement, but the old man did.

He began to read, or rather to recite, for it soon turned out that he was not reading at all. When a different picture was substituted without his awareness, he just kept going.

When this was pointed out to him, he simply said that he did not know the meaning of the symbols, but he knew the boards when he saw them and knew what they contained. What he recited did make sense—tribal histories—but no connection with any of the words he spoke and the signs on the boards could be established.

Linguists agreed that the Easter Island script probably was not a script as we understand the term. The pupils memorized what their teachers had memorized before them and the boards only assisted their memory. This was not a very cheering or even useful conclusion, but it covered the few known facts. Obviously both Paymaster Thomson and the bishop (Tepano Jaussen was his name) had come too late.

JUST a short number of years ago, a German linguist, Dr. Thomas Barthel, thought of one more possibility.

Linguists know only too well how often the deciphering of forgotten ancient scripts has gone wrong. The Egyptian hieroglyphs, for example, had been "deciphered" by somebody before Champollion actually deciphered them. It had been a completely wrong approach, giving results that could be expected from a fundamental mistake.

Maybe, Dr. Bartel reasoned, Bishop Jaussen's method had not been up to the task. It might help if one could look at the original notes, instead of the printed version. He corresponded with ecclesiastical authorities. Did the original notes still exist? Could they be traced? If so, could he look at them? They could be traced, they existed in a library of church documents near Rome, Dr. Barthel could look at them.

Dr. Barthel has reported since then that Bishop Jaussen had not known as much philology as would have been required. Most especially, he seems to have failed to catch Metoro Taou-aou-ré when the latter glossed over weaknesses in his own knowledge and indulged in some guesswork.

By eliminating what seemed to be wrong, Dr. Barthel reduced the vocabulary, but thinks that what

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was left is at least reliable. Guessing that the boards contain religious traditions, which are more or less known through other sources, Dr. Barthel went ahead, and feels that he can read and translate the boards.

One that he has translated states that the Easter Islanders came from another island, just as their tradition says. The boards gave the name of the island as Rangi Tea.

One thing Dr. Barthel (whose work on this won't be out until the middle of 1958) stresses is that he has translated one-third of all the tablets accessible to him, probably in reproduction, but that not one of them mentions the stone statues. The logical conclusion is that the script originated in the original home, namely Rangi Tea Island, but that the statues came into fashion on Easter Island, where there was soft volcanic rock that could be worked.

But what do they mean?

Among the many festivals of the Easter Islanders there was the festival, or rite, of the "bird man" which is a symbol often found carved in rock (Fig. 8). Deprived of all ceremony and symbolism, the festival can be described as a contest to obtain the first egg of the frigate bird from one of the three tinv bird islets to the south of the main island. This contest was actually rather dangerous, so it is understandable that the winner was a celebrated personality.

Because the "bird man" symbol is also carved on some statues, there is a connection between the bird man — the *tangata manu*, as the Easter Islanders say — and the statues. They were made either to celebrate the winner of a given year, or else the festival of that year.

Today's natives have forgotten the meaning of the statues too. When asked, they say that the statues are there "for decoration." And essentially they are right.

— WILLY LEY

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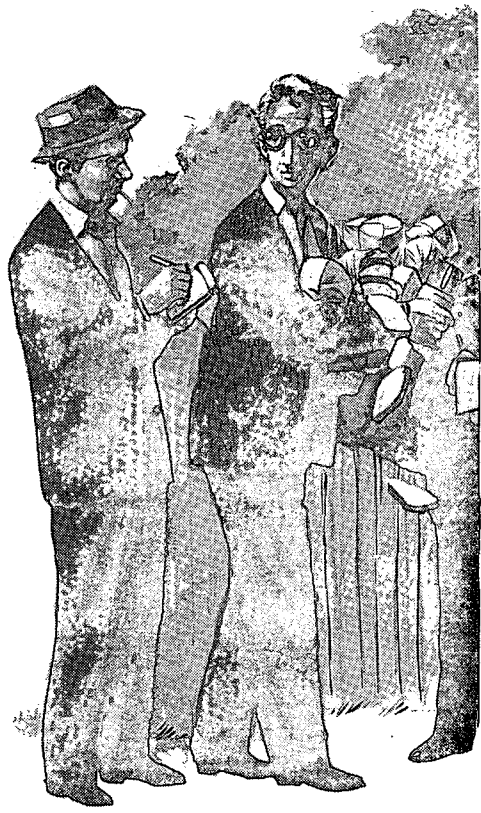
FIRST MAN

By CLYDE BROWN

He obstinately wanted no part in achieving the goal of generations—but the goal with equal obstinacy wanted all of him!



TO keep the record straight: Orville Close was first man on the Moon. Harold Ferguson was second. They never talk about it.

It started on that October morning when the piece came out in the Parkville *News*. Harold grumbled that they'd gotten the story all wrong, calling his ship a rocket ship, and treating him like a flagpole sitter or a man going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. His wife took their sad, thin little girl and went to live with her brother. The city police blocked off Elm Street, letting no one through except the residents. The neighbors were getting up a petition. But Orville refused to become excited.

What was going to happen?

Why, nothing.

Harold would probably crack up completely, but this evening that thing would still be standing there, solid as the Washington Monument.

Nevertheless, Orville's wife Polly was going to her sister's, across town. *She* wasn't going to stay there and be blown up! While she was getting ready, Orville picked up a package by the sink and carried it outside to the alley and

Illustrated by WOOD

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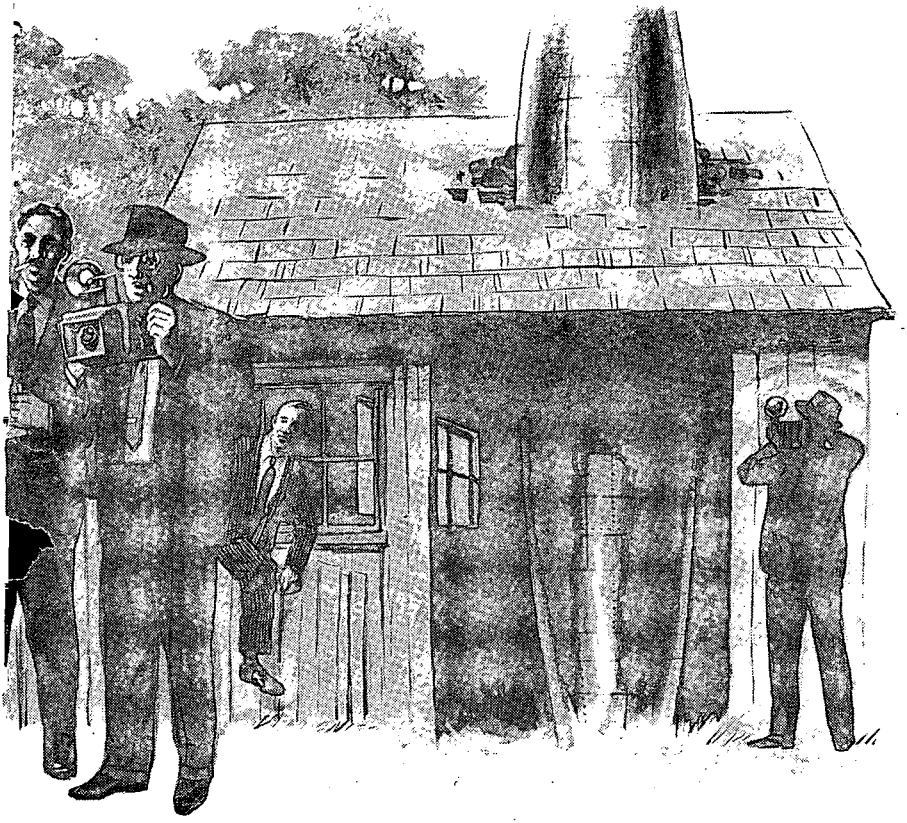

dropped it in the garbage can. He wore his double-breasted fall suit. He strolled to the boundary fence and leaned against a post.

A reporter was taking angle shots of the spaceship. Flashbulbs were scattered over Harold's garden.

It really does catch the eye, Orville thought. Smarten the ship up a little, put some stripes running down from the nose, a few pieces of chrome around over the body . . .

POOR old Harold came off his back porch carrying a thermos jug and six loaves of bread.

"Morning, Harold," said Orville.

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"Oh — morning, Orville." Harold flinched. Another reporter had come out of the shed and taken their picture.

"What's your name, mister?" the reporter asked Orville.

"I'd rather you left me out of this," Orville said.

A loaf of bread had broken open and slices were falling out. Harold put down the thermos jug and picked up the slices and stuffed them back into the wrapper. The first reporter came over.

"It's got Vitamin D." Harold grinned wretchedly. "Costs two cents more a loaf, but I thought, what the heck —"

"How about a shot of you and the missus saying good-by?" the first reporter said.

"Why — she left me," Harold blurted. He tried to get away, but the reporters hemmed him in.

"Was she scared?" the second reporter asked.

"Look, boys!" Orville put his hands on the top rail of the fence and climbed across. He was getting his shoes wet in the weeds in Harold's garden, but he didn't care. "The man has work to do. Can't you leave him alone?"

HE picked up the jug and took Harold by the elbow and led him into the shed.

There, resting on some concrete blocks on the dirt floor, was the base of the ship. In the semi-darkness, it looked harmless enough: like a tank, six or eight feet across, reaching up through a jagged hole in the roof.

"Harold, you could make a good thing out of this," Orville said. "All this publicity."

Harold was climbing a rickety ladder to the roof. Orville followed.

"Mount this thing on a trailer. Take her around to fairs and carnivals."

Orville waited on the roof while Harold climbed another ladder to the small oval door in the side of the ship. Harold called down: "You never saw the inside. Want to look around?"

"Well . . ." Orville glanced into his back yard. Polly wasn't ready yet. He climbed up and handed the jug to Harold and stuck his head in.

"Huh!" There wasn't much to see. Just a small compartment with some pipes leading from below into the nose. "You got to fix this up," he said. "Some Rube Goldberg contraptions."

"The works are all up here." Harold climbed a ladder and disappeared through a hole overhead. "C'mon up, I'd like you to see this!"

Orville looked down again into his yard. "It'll take her forever! Polly, I mean. Okay, I guess I got time for a look." He stepped in and climbed until his waist was through the hole.

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THE nose of the ship was dark. Harold was shining an extension lamp around. There were parts of a junked car and some old plumbing fixtures and Orville recognized the wheels of a lawnmower he'd left by the alley for the trash men to pick up. This didn't look like the inside of a spaceship. It looked exactly like a corner in Harold's basement.

"Oh, Lord," Orville said.

"I call this my scope." Harold was shining the light on a shaving mirror, on a long arm that could be swung and tilted about. "How about that? Pretty neat, huh?"

Neat was hardly the word for it. "Look here, Harold! The neighbors are getting an injunction. Why don't you play it smart? Fight it out in the courts. There'll be a lot of publicity—"

"They are?" Harold was hurt. He was shining the lamp in Orville's eyes.

"Yeah. Now while you're fighting it out in the courts—"

"Do you call that neighborly?"

"They're scared. They're afraid you'll blow the whole neighborhood to pieces."

"Well, hell with them!"

"While we're on that subject, ain't that my trouble lamp you're holding?"

"Yeah. Guess it is. Need it right away?"

"Just want you to remember where it came from."

"Actually, it'll be no use on the trip. I got her fixed so when I take off, the cord down at the base will come unplugged and—"

"Well, Polly must be ready by now." Orville gave up. Polly was right. Harold was insane.

Orville tried to turn on the ladder so that he could climb back down. His foot slipped. He spread his arms to keep from falling through the hole and knocked over the pile of bread.

"Watch out!" Harold yelped.

"I'm all right." Orville felt a slight tingle.

"Yes, but you—" Harold's voice trailed off with dismay. The light in his hand had gone out, but Orville didn't think of what this meant at the time.

There was light coming through the door below and Orville climbed down. Darn! He pulled out his handkerchief and tried to brush the dust off his lapels. He'd have to change suits, and that meant changing his socks and tie, and he was supposed to meet those people about that deal on Maplehurst Extension at nine. Well, he'd be late. He leaned out of the door.

"Orville!" shouted Harold. "Come back! Don't step out there!"

A LOT of fog was blowing down past the nose of the ship. Orville wondered where it came from. He stuck his foot out,

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reaching for the ladder. He heard Harold scrambling down from above and he wanted to get away from that madman. He reached farther. Harold grabbed his arm.

Then the fog cleared away and Orville swayed dizzily, gaping at where he had almost stepped. They had been going through a cloud. Now he looked down at dazzling clouds in the bright October sun and between them he saw the streets of Parkville, very neat, just like the map hanging in the office.

He dropped back inside and lay weakly on the floor. He grabbed one of the pipes and shakily clung to it.

"What happened?" he stammered.

"Hit the main switch." Harold was reaching out for the door handle. He banged the door shut with a concussion that burst inside Orville's head. "We took off."

IT was dark in there, at first; then Orville saw a dim violet light that filled the inside of the ship.

He followed Harold up the ladder into the nose of the ship and sank to the floor. Harold was twiddling with some knobs mounted on the dashboard of the junked car.

"Boy!" Orville pulled out his handkerchief again and swabbed his forehead. He tried to wipe the grime from his hands. "And I've never even been in an airplane!"

"Me either." Harold pounded on the dashboard. A meter didn't seem to be working. "There . . . guess I can open her up a little."

"Hey, wait! Take me back!"

Harold moved a knob an eighth of a turn. He switched on the scope and waited for it to warm up. He took off his glasses and wiped them, squinting at Orville with that one bad eye.

"Turn it around and take me back!"

"But I can't, Orville." Harold put on the glasses and looked into the scope. "It's working!"

"I demand it! You've made me late for the office as it is!"

"Sure looks different from the map," Harold said. "Must be the East Coast. There's Florida sticking out there."

He snapped off the scope and sat opposite Orville. He opened the thermos and poured coffee into the cap.

"Been so busy, didn't have my breakfast." He held out the cap to Orville. "I take mine without sugar."

Orville shook his head. "Do I understand —"

"Ugh! It's hot!" Harold put down the coffee and rummaged in some brown paper bags. "Should be some glazed doughnuts . . . Shoot! Bet I left them in the kitchen!"

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ORVILLE faced him firmly. "You've shown me it'll fly. I believe you. Now I give you one more chance—take me back!"

"But I can't!" Harold protested.

"There are laws about this sort of thing, my friend. This is abduction. Kidnapping. You know what the penalty is for that?"

"Well, gee, I didn't mean to take you along, Orville. You hit that switch—"

"It's criminal negligence, leaving a switch out there like that where it could be hit by accident!"

"Had to put it there so I could reach up from below and work it."

Orville balled his fists and stood squarely. Funny—it was no trouble at all, standing and walking around. If he hadn't seen those clouds, and the landscape sinking away, he'd swear the two of them were still in Harold's back yard.

"Do you take me back," he said, "or do I have to break every—"

"But I can't!" Harold grasped his wrist pleadingly. "I got her set up in a sequence. If I tried to change the sequence now, why—" He shuddered. "I haven't got any idea what might happen!"

Orville sat back down.

"I'm sorry." The weak way Harold said it made Orville feel worse than ever.

"Me! Trapped up here in this thing with you!" Orville said bitterly. "You can't even drive a car! You're just about the worst driver I know!"

"I know," Harold admitted. "But this is safer than a car. Besides, out where we're going, there'll be no traffic problem." He gave his inane giggle. "Far as I know, there's no one else at all!"

"And the neighborhood back there. Probably all blown to pieces. Polly. The house. My car! I got complete coverage on it, but who ever heard of a car wrecked by a spaceship? When we get back, if my insurance doesn't cover it, I'll sue you!"

"There's nothing hurt at all," Harold said. "Unless someone had his hand on the ship when we took off. I'd planned to have 'em stand back."

ORVILLE closed his eyes. Something was crossing and crisscrossing inside him like two rings tossed back and forth by jugglers. It was not painful, but it was disturbing. Something must be going wrong. He didn't trust Harold's mechanical ability. In the past ten years, Harold had been fired from a couple of filling station jobs because of blunders, once for leaving the plug out of a crank case, and once for botching up a flat tire repair.

"Running kind of rough, isn't she?" Orville said. "What makes this little—" He circled his hands

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sickly in front of his stomach.

Harold closed his eyes and made similar circles. "Oh, that's this counter-grav of mine. You see, the gravitation of the Earth—"

"Can't you do anything about it?" Orville was in no mood to listen to one of Harold's lectures.

"I could move her over so we couldn't feel it, but it would be shaking the ship then. Might tear it apart."

"Won't it tear us apart?"

"I don't think so. We got more give to us than the ship has." Harold was able to drink the coffee now. "No, I don't think I've done a bad job on this. First time a machine is built, you're bound to run into a few bugs. But this is working, so far, even better than I expected."

"Yeah," Orville had to admit, "it ain't bad—for a guy with no mechanical ability whatever."

II

HAROLD had opened the ship up a little more, and according to him, they were now moving eighteen thousand miles per hour or so, approximately. Orville had tried to drink some water from a milk bottle, but the sight of the water, bouncing in rhythm to the invisible circles in his stomach, had given him nausea.

Harold knelt on the floor, smoothing out a soiled sheet of paper. In the center was a small circle, labeled in Harold's sloppy handwriting "Earth." An arrow showed the direction of the Earth's motion around the Sun. Outside this was a larger circle labeled "Orbit of Moon." A spiral reached out from the Earth to intersect the Moon's orbit.

"Had the darnedest time drawing this," Harold said. "Got it out of an astronomy book. *Let's Look at the Stars* by someone. Thirty-five cents. Let's see now."

He wet the point of the pencil and made a mark. He scratched his head and erased the mark and made another.

"Harold, another thing," said Orville. "I weigh around one ninety-five. Won't that take a lot of extra gas?"

"Nope. Doesn't matter if you weigh a ton. According to my counter-grav principle—"

"Won't it get stuffy in here with two of us?"

"Why, I have some oxygen. That welding place in back of the garage where I work—got a tank off them. Had to pay cash, but I can turn in the empty when we get back."

"You sure one tank'll be enough?"

"Well—" Harold flushed guiltily. "You won't say anything about this? I took along several extra tanks, just to make sure. I wasn't stealing. You see, I figure I might

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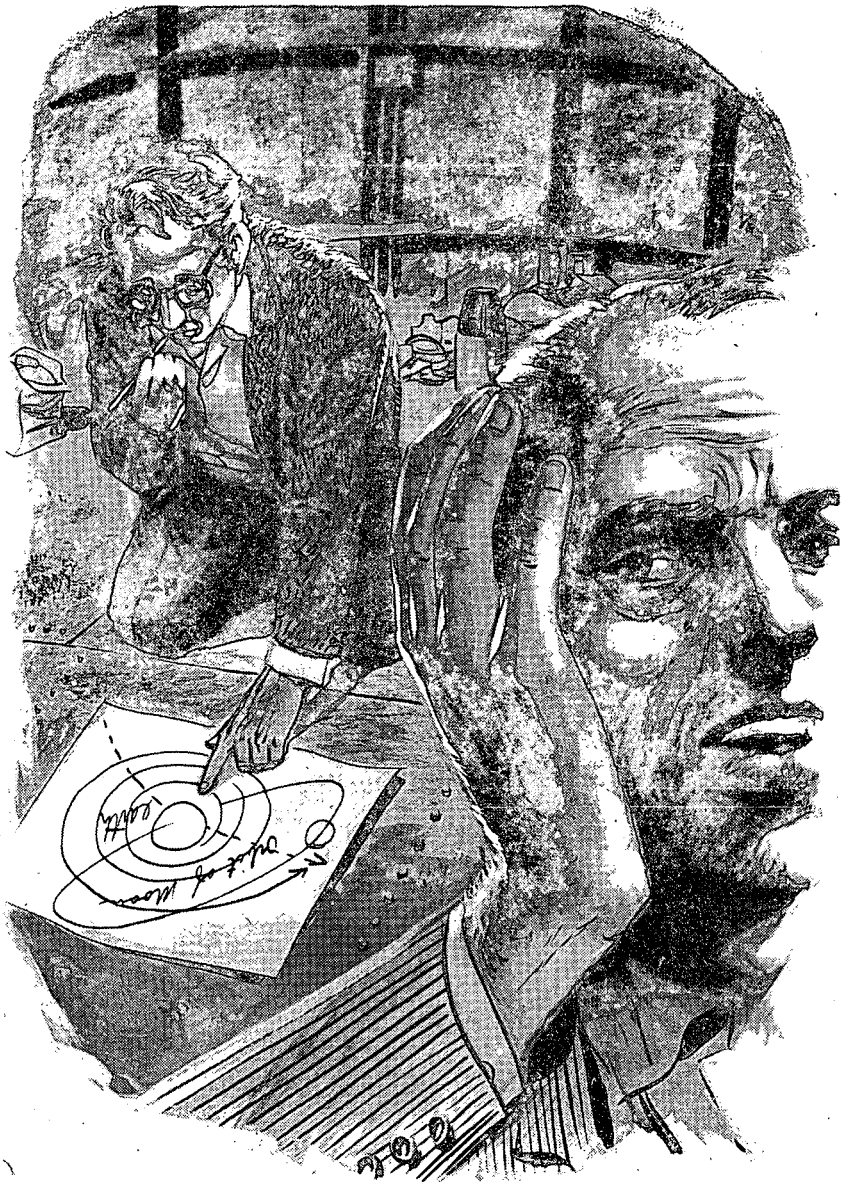

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make some money out of this thing."

"Say!" Orville hadn't thought of this angle before. "You really could."

"And there should be plenty of food. Let me see now." He fished in his pocket and brought out a piece of brown wrapping paper. "I'll run over the list and make sure I didn't forget something." He glanced up sharply. "Relax! Make yourself to home. And the little boy's room is down there." He squinted at the paper. "Water. There's plenty. Six family-size cans pork and beans. Charged 'em." He ran through the list, mumbling, then looked up brightly. "Yep. Looks all right. Nope, there's one thing I forgot. Stickum plaster! Doggone. Never go anywhere without my first aid kit. Never know what's liable to happen."

"Y'know, Harold," Orville said, "I'm beginning to see some possibilities in this trip. First man on the Moon. Think of the fuss they made over Lindy and Wrong-way Corrigan. The guys who climbed Mount Everest. Why, that was nothing!"

"Course, I'm not doing this for fame. Or money, either."

"Then why are you doing it?"

Harold stared vaguely toward where the Moon would be if they could see it. "I guess . . . because it's there."

"Huh! Well, don't forget I'm in on it, too."

SOME time later, when the Moon first appeared on the scope, about the size of a basketball, Harold indulged in a mild spree. He opened some pineapple juice. Orville did not feel like drinking any. In fact, he felt ill.

"Space sickness," Harold said. "Lot of bread is good for that. Stuff yourself with it. Just think—back there on Earth, they're going about their business and no one knows that we're out here heading for the Moon. Just think—if I'd call them on the radio and report making first contact with the Moon—

"Harold, one thing. How're you going to get her down?"

"Naval observatory would be the people to call, I guess. They'd notify the President and they'd interrupt the TV programs — I thought of putting a radio in here, but I'd already gone way over my budget."

"How do you plan to land her?"

"And wouldn't those guys at the Atomic Energy Commission have red faces! You know, I wrote them, asking to use some of their energy and — darn these government bureaus!—they never even had the courtesy to answer my letter!"

"Listen—"

"And the birds at the college!

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When I took that navigation chart to the astronomy department to see if they'd check it for me, they blew up! Acted like I had no business flying to the Moon. Acted like they owned the thing. Bunch of smart-alecs! With their double-talk! Knew less than I did when I went there."

He looked at his watch. "I'm going to have a snack and then I'll get some sleep. That's one good thing about having you along. Now I can sleep and not have to worry."

As Harold sawed at the top of a can of beans with the can-opener. Orville closed his eyes. Instantly, he saw the ship, heading for the Moon, and then there was a blinding flash. He opened his eyes. Harold was digging into the can with a spoon, munching away.

"Just brought one." Harol waved the spoon. "But I'm n poison. Better have some of the beans. They'll stick to your ri

Orville crawled to the door leading to the other compartment, flung it open and leaned there a while. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Harold was wiping the spoon on a piece of brown paper.

"Last call!" Harold giggled and pushed the can to Orville. Orville pushed it away and closed his eyes and sat, holding his middle. When he opened them, Harold was sleeping.

Orville crawled over and shook him. "How soon do you want me to wake you up?"

Harold sat up. "Oh, my gosh! I forgot! Why, don't let me sleep more than four hours."

HE went to sleep again. Orville sat back. He could see it. Harold, watching the Moon grow bigger and bigger on that scope, until they were right on it, then turning with a surprised look: Oh, my gosh! I forgot something! Then he'd give that giggle and there'd be that crash . . .

Orville's watch said two hours, but he wasn't sure. Maybe he'd slept and the hand had gone clear around. He kept seeing that flash. Some amateur astronomer, looking at the Moon right then, might see it. He'd be a bungler, like Harold, and it wouldn't be much of a telescope. He was always seeing flashes in the thing, from cars or lightning bugs or from the kitchen door, because his wife was there yelling at him, just like Rosie yelling at Harold. For they always married women like Rosie, or they made women turn that way. Polly, now, she nagged all the time, but that was different!

Orville drank some water and ate some bread, and when he swallowed, he felt that circular bump-bump grab the bread and chop away at it, just like Polly feeding stale bread into the meat chopper to make stuffing.

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I have no business being out here, he moaned.

Here he was riding to the Moon with a tinkering idiot who couldn't fix a kitchen faucet or locate a blown fuse in the basement. Streams of moisture were trickling down the wall. The metal felt cold, like the window of the car on a day when you needed the heater and defroster. Was something going wrong?

Maybe they were out of oxygen. He listened to Harold snoring. Once Harold took a quick breath, and strangled, and turned his head restlessly. His glasses were slipping off.

Orville looked at his watch. He couldn't believe that just five minutes had gone by since he'd looked at it last. He could hear Harold's two-dollar watch ticking away, almost as loud as his own. His was gaining on Harold's and then they were ticking together so that the combined pounding sent echoes through the ship. He tried to crawl.

He couldn't move.

"Harold!" The ticking of the watches drowned out his voice. "We're in trouble! We're out of oxygen! Help!"

It was like a bad dream. Then something woke him: Harold, stumbling across his legs, turning on the scope and waiting, breathing hard, for it to come to life.

Harold saw that he was awake. "You went to sleep! You shoulda woke me. It's been six hours!"

Orville said nothing.

"We may be clear past the Moon by now," Harold grumbled.

ORVILLE turned his face to the wall. He heard the hiss as Harold ran in fresh oxygen. "Shoot! Better go down and hook up a new tank." Harold clanked around in the other end of the ship and came back.

"How far out are we?" asked Orville.

"Not far. I'm cutting down the speed some."

"Uh . . . how do you plan to take her down?"

"That's an interesting point, now. Let's see . . ."

"Wouldn't it be better if we just flew up close, not too close, and then headed for home? Of course, there's that problem back there, too."

"Don't you want the beans? I'll eat 'em then."

"But I'd feel better crashing on the Earth, somehow, than on the Moon—"

"Who says we're going to crash? There are several ways to set her down. Head first, tail first, but I guess I'll lay her in sideways. It'll be easier to crawl outside."

"What?"

"Sure." Harold was munching beans. Then he rummaged in the supplies and brought out a jar of

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peaches. He drank off some of the juice. "Rosie never gets enough sugar in these to suit me." The peaches slid off the spoon. He dug in with his fingers and brought out a slice. "Point of the whole thing. Explore. Look around." He tilted the jar to his mouth and let slices fall into his mouth. "Pick up some samples of rocks and things."

"You can get rocks right around home."

"But these are different. These weigh only a quarter as much as the rocks on Earth. Or is it a sixth?"

"In that case—" Orville started gathering up empty bags and cans and putting them into a soup carton.

"What're you doing?"

"Cleaning the place up a little. We can get rid of some of this trash."

"Don't throw those out! I paid a deposit on them." Harold pulled out the empty milk bottles and put them back in the case.

III

HAROLD had said the landing would be as gentle as laying a baby in its cradle. It wasn't exactly.

He said: "There!"

"Are we down?"

Harold nodded. Orville let go of the railing he'd been hanging onto. Harold unplugged something.

The ship went dark and started rolling. It was a slow, drunken roll and as noisy as an oil drum going down the court house steps. There was a final hard blow; then the ship rocked and lay still.

Orville sat up. He could hear Harold scrambling about, and then a flashlight came on.

"What happened?"

"Must have landed on the side of a mountain. Rolled down when I turned off our counter-grav. Shoot!" Harold held up something. "Broke a lens in my glasses. There's another trip to the eye-doctor's."

Orville rescued a couple of bottles that were spilling water. Everything else seemed to be all right. The ship lay on its side now and Harold was crawling through the hole leading to the other compartment. When Orville got through, Harold was hauling something from the other end of the ship.

"What we waiting for?" Orville put his hand on the handle of the outer door. "Last one out is a—"

"Wait a minute! You gotta wear this thing." Harold was laying out a spacesuit. He explained how it worked. He didn't object a great deal when Orville volunteered to go out first.

"We can take turns." Harold helped Orville slide his feet into the thing and pull it on. It fitted Orville rather tightly in places,

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but it seemed to be all right.

"Be careful now." Harold squinted at him through the one lens of his glasses. "Don't tear her on a rock or anything. You'd pop like a kid's balloon."

"Wait a minute!"

Harold paused, holding the helmet.

"I can't go through with it," Orville said. "I was planning a mean trick on you. I was going to be the first man."

"What difference does that make? We're both in on it together." Harold clapped the helmet down on Orville's shoulders. He tightened some clamps and leaned close and said something which Orville could not hear. Then Orville saw that he wanted to shake hands, so Orville shook his hand.

Harold squirmed back through the hole into the nose, waved and shut the door.

ORVILLE aimed the flashlight at the outer door. He turned the valve beside the door, feeling the suit puff out around him, and when the pressure in the compartment was gone, he reached toward the handle. His eyes were watering. He had to use all of his strength to move the handle; then the door popped open, swinging out and down, and he was looking out at the Moon.

There was glaring light and a

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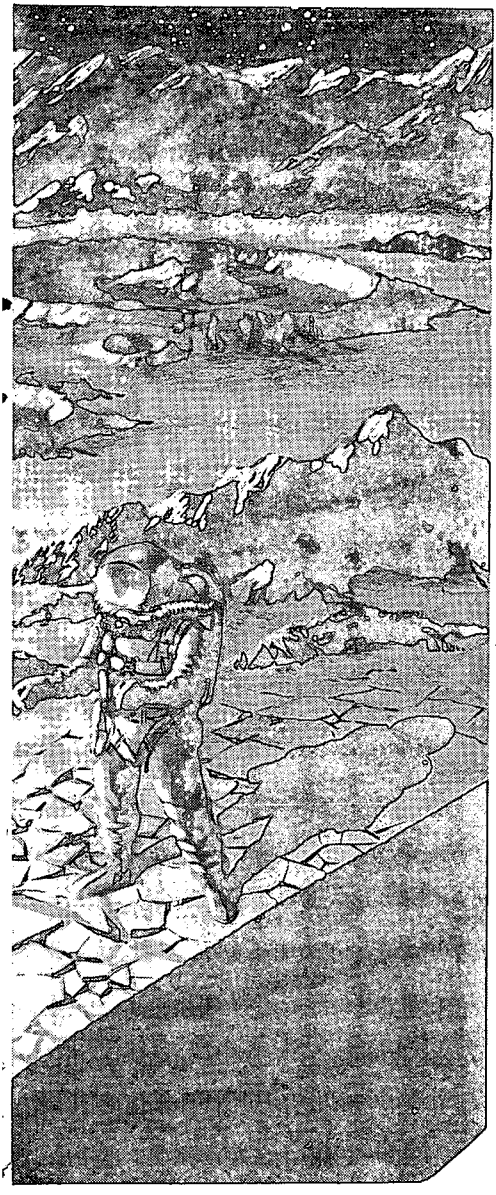

kind of fog. He laid down the flashlight and, groping, found the soap carton in which he'd put the refuse accumulated during the trip, and flung the box into the fog.

He looked out again. There was nothing but the glaring white void. "Well, that settles that!" There was no use getting out. On the other hand, how about a souvenir?

He stuck a leg out through the opening, which was now about two feet high and four feet wide. By wriggling, he got the other leg out, but he couldn't touch the ground. He reached his left foot a little farther and touched something that rolled slightly, then was solid. That's far enough, he thought; to hell with the souvenir!

But the mittens were too clumsy. He couldn't pull himself back in. He lowered himself farther and stood. He shuffled among the loose, rolling stones and reached down and picked one of them up. Harold was right: they weighed a lot less than the rocks on Earth. He cradled the thing in one arm and stood there.

Here he was, standing on the Moon! The very first man! He hugged the souvenir to his body. They'd keep it on the coffee table, between those two awful ashtrays Polly had brought back from Niagara Falls, and when anyone asked him what was that funny rock lying there, he'd say—

Orville had been reaching, try-

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ing to touch the ship. His hand met nothing . . .

Now keep calm, he thought. Don't get turned around. And don't panic. It can't be far away. He reached out in another direction and took a step, but still his waving hand met nothing. Try this way then . . .

As he turned, his elbow struck the edge of the opening. Maybe he'd been waving his arm through the opening all the time!

He tossed in the souvenir. He wriggled in after it. Careful! What did Harold say about tearing the suit?

He closed the outer door. As he returned the pressure to the compartment, the suit became limp against him, and Orville was so weak that he sank to the floor. He was still lying there when Harold took off the headpiece.

"It's a total flop," Orville told him. "It's been a waste of time. No use going out."

HE told Harold about the narrow escape he'd had in the fog. *Fog* on the Moon? This didn't sound right to Harold. He was fooling with the helmet, scratching frost from the inside of the visor. "Couldn't you get the defroster working? This little button right here. I showed you."

Orville knew, to his shame and disgust, that he had been looking at his own breath all of that time. Harold now insisted on going out. Orville shined the flashlight around. He was looking for the souvenir, and he found it, near their feet.

It was a package carefully wrapped in paper, some of the refuse which he had thrown outside.

That figures, he thought bitterly. Well, anyway, I was *first man.* They can't take that away from me!

Harold was gone a long time. The nose of the ship was becoming very cold and the only light came from the luminous dial of Orville's watch. What was Harold doing out there? Maybe he'd snagged his suit and blown up like a soap bubble. How long should Orville wait before giving up? He should have learned how to run the ship, in case of an emergency like this.

A distant clank startled him. The ship rolled slightly. Orville reached out a hand in the dark to steady himself and chilled when he realized what he'd put his hand on. It was the starting switch.

What was that idiot doing out there?

Then Harold was back, breathing hard, squinting through his one good lens. "Boy, what a sight! I'd give anything for a camera!"

"Never mind that! Let's go! I'm freezing!"

They were off without any trouble and the dim violet light

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returned and the ice on the compartment walls began to melt. When the ship was settled on course, Harold took off the rest of the spacesuit, pulled some paper from the glove compartment of the dashboard and began writing.

"It's the official report," Harold said presently. "Getting it all down while it's fresh in my mind."

"Let's see that!" Orville couldn't read Harold's handwriting. "What's it say?"

"You really want to hear it? Well . . ." Harold cleared his throat modestly and began to read. "'The *Discovery*'—decided to call her the *Discovery* on account of —'the *Discovery* was lying on her side in the shade, but a blinding light was coming down from some peaks. It nearly blinded me! Boy, what a—'" Harold squinted over a word—"'sight!'"

"Wait a minute! You giving me credit?"

"What for?"

"For being the first man."

"Oh, sure. I mention that in here some place."

"Just so there's no mistake!" Orville suddenly felt very drowsy. He curled up facing the wall and went to sleep.

When he awoke, he saw Harold leaning against the wall, his glasses sliding down, his head nodding. Orville reached over and jerked his foot.

"There now," he said. "Old neighbor. You go to sleep. I'll watch her for a while."

ORVILLE felt fine now. While Harold slept, he opened a jar of Rosie's peaches, drank off the juice and dug in with the spoon. It wasn't really so bad, not shaving or taking a bath, roughing it out here in space!

He dug into his coat pocket, found a cigar, but it was crushed. Oh, well. He flung it into the trash. He folded his arms, leaned back his head.

They sat at the head of a banquet table, he and Harold. The mayor was there, and the college president, and way down the table was the boss, old Haverstrom, real proud to be in such important company. And the governor was there and — by gosh! Sitting right next to Orville was the President of the United States!

Someone was making a speech — they were awarding some kind of prize for *first man* and there was applause and they were waiting for Orville to get up. He stood, waited for applause to die down.

"Thank you, friends . . . all of you . . . being no speechmaker . . . but I do want to say right here and now . . . no more idea of receiving this great honor tonight than of — flying to the Moon!"

That would get a laugh. Then he'd go on and give due credit to Harold, poor old Harold sleep-

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ing there, innocent as a baby about such things.

Why, the publicity angle alone could take up a man's full time. Guest appearances on TV. Getting signed up as technical adviser in Hollywood. But that was just the beginning.

Take the metal in this ship. Harold had made it out of junk from the city dump, melting it in a forge he'd fashioned out of an old oil drum. It had to be cheap and easy to make — but you could probably use it for almost anything. There was your whole metal industry shot to pieces!

This thing he called a scope now. With a big corporation behind it, Lord only knew what it would do to the communications setup.

But the big thing was this counter-grav business! *There* was where you got into the big leagues. If Harold could do this with it, think what General Motors could do! Orville could see TWA, B&O and steamship companies bidding against each other for it. And car manufacturers and freight handlers — and tugboat owners — and taxi fleets—and the armed forces—

Harold was waking up. He rubbed his skimpy whiskers, put on his broken glasses, creaked over to the scope and turned it on. Harold, old boy, Orville thought tenderly, you don't know it yet, but your troubles are all over!

"What do you see, Harold?"

"The Earth."

Orville went over. There was a dark green spot on the scope, bright against deep black. "You sure?"

"Almost positive. That's the only thing that size there is right around here."

"Well, fine! That calls for a celebration, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Forgot that. We can open the tuna."

IV

"IT'S about time," Orville said, "that we started figuring out a plan." He scraped the bottom of the can. The tuna tasted fine. He took a swig of pineapple juice and passed the can back to Harold.

"Yeah, I been thinking about that," said Harold.

"I've had more experience in that line than you, so maybe—"

"Do you think mankind is ready for my secret?"

"There, you see?" Orville laughed heartily. "Now don't you worry about such things."

"But look what they did with the atomic bomb. And if this ever got loose—"

"Harold!" Orville's laugh was less hearty. "Do you think you could keep this a secret? The minute we land, they'll be all over us. The government can impound this ship, you know."

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"Won't do them any good. They can tear it all apart and never find out a thing."

Hours later, they were still arguing.

"If the government had it, they'd build a war machine and then the Russians would steal it—"

"Harold! That's Communist talk!"

"Shoot! I'm no Communist!"

"You're playing right into their hands . . ."

It went on and on. Then: "Harold — as your neighbor — won't you tell *me* what it is?"

"I'll try . . ."

Orville sat up, tingling. You take gravity, Harold said. What do we know about it? Was it like a lot of rubber bands, stretching back and forth between everything, or was it a flow, like water? Now if it was a flow, it would have to flow back some way, or else you'd run out, wouldn't you? Then if you hooked onto this counter-flow—

Orville nodded. This wasn't so hard to understand. He felt a little nervous. "Go on, Harold."

"I guess it's none of those things." Harold gave his inane giggle.

Orville felt cheated. "You call this neighborly? Remember when I drove clear out into the country with a gallon of gas that time when you got stuck?"

"I'm trying. You gotta think of it up to that point, then you gotta think the *other* way. But you can't explain it. You just do it."

HAROLD picked up two of the rings from Rosie's fruit jars and moved them back and forth across one another. He tried with three rings, dropped them.

"It's no use."

"Try harder."

Harold shook his head. "I suppose if I wanted to bad enough... But now that we been to the Moon, there's nothing else I want to do."

Orville reached for the rings and tried.

Suddenly, Harold sprang up. "Oh, my socks!"

He turned on the scope and swung it wildly back and forth. "You made me commit a boo-boo. I think we've shot right past the Earth!"

The scope was getting weak. They could not find the Earth until Harold had reversed course. Then Orville saw it, the edge filling part of the scope. Harold's eyes were watering. He wiped the good lens of his glasses and leaned close.

"Can you make out any land?" he asked Orville.

"This looks like Indian Lake. I've fished there lots of times."

"It would be something bigger. Say, Greenland or South America."

This was the first time Orville

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realized they might not land squarely in Harold's back yard. He began looking intently at the scope.

"What's this kidney-bean shape?"

Harold squinted. "Think that's Australia. Now we're getting somewhere."

"But it belongs down here."

"We're coming up on it the other way."

"Can't we get closer to home than that?"

"I'll not be too particular where it is, just so it's land. The Earth is mostly covered with water."

Harold began turning the knobs and muttering. "Let me see now . . . gotta miss Mount Everest . . ." At last, he turned off the scope. "It's clear gone. I'm taking her down slow. Will you look outside, Orville?"

Orville gulped. But Harold said it was the only way, so he squeezed into the other compartment. There were now about six of the little circles going back and across inside of him. He stood a little to one side and struck the lever of the outer door sharply with the palm of his hand. The door gave a faint "swoosh" and was open about an inch. His ears crackled and there was a dull whispering in his head like the sound in a seashell.

He put his face to the door, but saw nothing except the blue sky.

"You sure we came to the right place?" he asked worriedly.

"Positive . . . almost," Harold called back. "Are we over land or water?"

Orville looked up. There was a brown, black and white landscape. Trees hung down like icicles around a frozen lake.

"There's land, but it's upside down."

"Just a minute." Harold did something and the trees and land swirled around until they were underneath.

NOT far away, as they came down gently, Orville saw a building with people outside. Or he thought they were people. Harold set the ship down on its side in the snow and Orville stepped out. Then Harold was out beside him, slapping him on the shoulder.

"Well, old buddy-buddy! How about that?"

"Yeah." Orville spoke with less enthusiasm. "How about that?"

He proposed that they get in and ride back to civilization, but Harold said there wasn't enough power left and it couldn't be done. They started walking toward the house Orville had seen.

Halfway there, they met four men wearing gray overcoats and furry hats. One carried a rifle, and as Harold ran shouting up to him, the man lifted the rifle and struck

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Harold across the head, knocking him into the snow and breaking the other lens of his glasses. For a while, Orville wondered if it was the right planet after all. But, he decided, the men were Russian soldiers somewhere in Siberia.

Since the men were more interested in looting the ship than guarding the prisoners, it was not hard to slip away and get to a railroad that ran east and west. Even Harold knew which direction to take. Their journey out of Siberia, through Korea and Japan to San Francisco, though more difficult than their trip to the Moon, was not very interesting. Once, on a freighter in mid-Pacific, Harold tried to convince a fellow deckhand that they were on their way back from the Moon. He agreed not to talk of it again.

"Looks like Rosie's still gone," Harold said as they slunk up the alley behind Harold's shed. All the leaves had fallen and the place looked forlorn without the spaceship poking up through the roof.

"Wonder what they thought," Orville said, "when the ship disappeared, and us with it?"

"Nothing, I expect."

"If we'd disappeared with a couple of blondes now, the whole world would know about it."

THEY parted. The back door was locked. As, Orville went around the house, he heard the TV going. Polly sat in the turquoise armchair, sewing on a dress. She put down the sewing and folded her arms.

The oration lasted five minutes. He could still hear her upstairs through the noise of the shower.

Then, after a visit to the barber's, he went to face old Haverstrom. This lecture was not quite as long, and through it the boss had a trace of a leer, and a certain respect, though he let Orville know these disappearances should not become a habit.

Harold did not do so well. His old job was gone and he was a whole week getting another. Rosie did not come back for still another week.

It was hard for Orville to believe that a moonstruck fellow like Harold could change his ways, but that was what happened. It was as though that one wild trip had satisfied something inside Harold, for he never fooled with things like that again. He even joined church.

As for Orville: some evenings, when he reads of artificial satellites or of trips to the Moon, he feels a sharp rise in blood pressure and he breathes fast. But a glance across the room at Polly in her turquoise chair sewing is enough to make him swallow and squirm back and keep his mouth shut.

— CLYDE BROWN

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the eel

BY MIRIAM ALLEN DeFORD

The punishment had to fit more than just the crime — it had to suit every world in the Galaxy!

Illustrated by DILLON

HE was intimately and unfavorably known everywhere in the Galaxy, but with special virulence on eight planets in three different solar systems. He was eagerly sought on each; they all wanted to try him and punish him — in each case, by their own laws and customs. This had been going on for 26 terrestrial years, which means from minus ten to plus 280 in some of the others. The only place that didn't want him was Earth, his native planet, where he was too smart to operate — but, of course, the Galactic Police were looking for him there too, to deliver him to the authorities of the other planets in accordance with the Interplanetary Constitution.

For all of those years, The Eel (which was his Earth monicker; elsewhere, he was known by names

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indicating equally squirmy and slimy life-forms) had been gayly going his way, known under a dozen different aliases, turning up suddenly here, there, everywhere, committing his gigantic depredations, and disappearing as quickly and silently when his latest enterprise had succeeded. He specialized in enormous, unprecedented thefts. It was said that he despised stealing anything under the value of 100 million terrestrial units, and most of his thefts were much larger than that.

He had no recognizable *modus operandi,* changing his methods with each new crime. He never left a clue. But, in bravado, he signed his name to every job: his monicker flattered him, and after each malefaction the victim—usually a government agency, a giant corporation, or one of the clan enterprises of the smaller planets—would receive a message consisting merely of the impudent depiction of a large wriggling eel.

They got him at last, of course. The Galactic Police, like the prehistoric Royal Canadian Mounted, have the reputation of always catching their man. (Sometimes they don't catch him till he's dead, but they catch him.) It took them 26 years, and it was a hard job, for The Eel always worked alone and never talked afterward.

They did it by the herculean labor of investigating the source of the fortune of every inhabitant of Earth, since all that was known was that The Eel was a terrestrial. Every computer in the Federation worked overtime analyzing the data fed into it. It wasn't entirely a thankless task, for, as a by-product, a lot of embezzlers, tax evaders and lesser robbers were turned up.

In the end, it narrowed down to one man who owned more than he could account for having. Even so, they almost lost him, for his takings were cached away under so many pseudonyms that it took several months just to establish that they all belonged to the same person. When that was settled, the police swooped. The Eel surrendered quietly; the one thing he had been surest of was never being apprehended, and he was so dumfounded he was unable to put up any resistance.

And then came the still greater question: which of the planets was to have him?

XYSTIL said it had the first right because his theft there had been the largest — a sum so huge, it could be expressed only by an algebraic index. Artha's argument was that his first recorded crime had been on that planet. Medoris wanted him because its only penalty for any felony is an immediate and rather horrible death, and that would guarantee

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getting rid of The Eel forever.

Ceres put in a claim on the ground that it was the only planet or moon in the Sol System in which he had operated, and since he was a terrestrial, it was a matter for local jurisdiction. Eb pleaded that it was the newest and poorest member of the Galactic Federation, and should have been protected in its inexperience against his thievishness.

Ha-Almirath argued that it had earned his custody because it was its Chief Ruler who had suggested to the police the method which had resulted in his arrest. Vavinour countered that it should be the chosen recipient, since the theft there had included desecration of the High Temple.

Little Agsk, which was only a probationary Galactic Associate, modestly said that if it were given The Eel, its prompt and exemplary punishment might qualify it for full membership, and it would be grateful for the chance.

A special meeting of the Galactic Council had to be called for the sole purpose of deciding who got The Eel.

Representatives of all the claimant planets made their representations. Each told in eloquent detail why his planet and his alone was entitled to custody of the arch-criminal, and what they would do to him when — not if — they got him. After they had all been heard, the councilors went into executive session, with press and public barred. An indiscreet councilor (it was O-Al of Phlagon of Altair, if you want to know) leaked later some of the rather indecorous proceedings.

The Earth councilor, he reported, had been granted a voice but no vote, since Earth was not an interested party as to the crime, but only as to the criminal. Every possible system of arbitration had been discussed — chronological, numerical in respect to the size of the theft, legalistic in respect to whether the culprit would be available to hand on to another victim when the first had got through punishing him.

In the welter of claims and counterclaims, one harassed councilor wearily suggested a lottery. Another in desperation recommended handling The Eel a list of prospective punishments on each of the eight planets and observing which one seemed to inspire him with most dread — which would then be the one selected. One even proposed poisoning him and announcing his sudden collapse and death.

The sessions went on day and night; the exhausted councilors separated for brief periods of sleep, then went at it again. A hung jury was unthinkable; something had to be decided. The news outlets of the entire Galaxy were beginning to issue sarcastic editorials about

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procrastination and coddling criminals, with hints about bribery and corruption, and remarks that perhaps what was needed was a few impeachments and a new general election.

So at last, in utter despair, they awarded The Eel to Agsk, as a sort of bonus and incentive. Whichever planet they named, the other seven were going to scream to high heaven, and Agsk was least likely to be able to retaliate against any expressions of indignation.

AGSKIANS, as everyone knows, are fairly humanoid beings, primitives from the outer edge of the Galaxy. They were like college freshmen invited to a senior fraternity. This was their Big Chance to Make Good.

The Eel, taciturn as ever, was delivered to a delegation of six of them sent to meet him in one of their lumbering spaceships, a low countergrav machine such as Earth had outgrown several millennia before. They were so afraid of losing him that they put a metal belt around him with six chains attached to it, and fastened all six of themselves to him. Once on Agsk, he was placed in a specially made stone pit, surrounded by guards, and fed through the only opening.

In preparation for the influx of visitors to the trial, an anticipated greater assembly of off-planeters than little Agsk had ever seen, they evacuated their capital city temporarily, resettling all its citizens except those needed to serve and care for the guests, and remodeled the biggest houses for the accommodation of those who had peculiar space, shape, or other requirements.

Never since the Galactic Federation was founded had so many beings, human, humanoid, semi-humanoid and non-humanoid, gathered at the same time on any one member-planet. Every newstape, tridimens, audio and all other varieties of information services—even including the drum amplifiers of Medoris and the ray-variants of Eb — applied for and were granted a place in the courtroom. This, because no other edifice was large enough, was an immense stone amphitheater usually devoted to rather curious games with animals; since it rains on Agsk only for two specified hours on every one of their days, no roof was needed. At every seat, there was a translatophone, with interpreters ready in plastic cages to translate the Intergalactic in which the trial was conducted into even the clicks and hisses of Jorg and the eye-flashes of Omonro.

And in the midst of all this, the cause and purpose of it all, sat the legendary Eel.

Seen at last, he was hardly an impressive figure. Time had been

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going on and The Eel was in his fifties, bald and a trifle paunchy. He was completely ordinary in appearance, a circumstance which had, of course, enabled him to pass unobserved on so many planets; he looked like a salesman or a minor official, and had indeed been so taken by the unnoticing inhabitants of innumerable planets.

People had wondered, when word came of some new outrage by this master-thief, if perhaps he had disguised himself as a resident of the scene of each fresh crime, but now it was obvious that this had not been necessary. He had been too clever to pick any planet where visitors from Earth were not a common sight, and he had been too insignificant for anyone to pay attention to him.

THE criminal code of Agsk is unique in the Galaxy, though there are rumors of something similar among a legendary extinct tribe on Earth called the Guanches. The high priest is also the chief executive (as well as the minister of education and head of the medical faculty), and he rules jointly with a priestess who also officiates as chief judge.

The Agskians have some strange ideas to a terrestrial eye — for example, suicide is an honor, and anyone of insufficient rank who commits it condemns his immediate family to punishment for his presumption. They are great family people, in general. Also, they never lie, and find it hard to realize that other beings do.

Murder, to them, is merely a matter for negotiation between the murderer and the relatives of the victim, provided it is open and without deceit. But grand larceny, since property is the foundation of the family, is punished in a way that shows that the Agskians, though technologically primitive, are psychologically very advanced.

They reason that death, because it comes inevitably to all, is the least of misfortunes. Lasting grief, remorse and guilt are the greatest. So they let the thief live and do not even imprison him.

Instead, they find out who it is that the criminal most loves. If they do not know who it is, they merely ask him, and since Agskians never lie, he always tells them. Then they seize that person, and kill him or her, slowly and painfully, before the thief's eyes.

And the agreement had been that The Eel was to be tried and punished by the laws and customs of the planet to which he was awarded.

The actual trial and conviction of The Eel were almost perfunctory. Without needing to resort to torture, his jailers had been presented, on a platter as it were, with a full confession — so far as the particular robbery he had com-

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mitted on Agsk was concerned. There is a provision for defense in the Agskian code, but it was unneeded because The Eel had pleaded guilty.

But he knew very well he would not be executed by the Agskians; he would instead be set free (presumably with a broken heart) to be handed over to the next claimant—and that, the Council had decided, would be Medoris. Since Medoris always kills its criminals, that would end the whole controversy.

So the Eel was quite aware that his conviction by Agsk would be only the preliminary to an exquisitely painful and lingering demise at the two-clawed hands of the Medorans. His business was somehow to get out from under.

Naturally, the resources of the Galactic Police had been at the full disposal of the officials of Agsk.

The files had been opened, and the Agskians had before them The Eel's history back to the day of his birth. He himself had been questioned, encelographed, hypnotized, dormitized, injected, psychographed, subjected to all the means of eliciting information devised by all eight planets — for the other seven, once their first resentment was over, had reconciled themselves and cooperated wholeheartedly with Agsk.

Medoris especially had been of the greatest help. The Medorans could hardly wait.

IN the spate of news of the trial that inundated every portion of the Galaxy, there began to be discovered a note of sympathy for this one little creature arrayed against the mightiest powers of the Galaxy. Poor people who wished they had his nerve, and romantic people who dreamed of adventures they would never dare perform, began to say that The Eel wasn't so bad, after all; he became a symbol of the rebellious individual thumbing his nose at entrenched authority. Students of Earth prehistory will recognize such symbols in the mythical Robin Hood and Al Capone.

These were the people who were glad to put up when bets began to be made. At first the odds were ten to one against The Eel; then, as time dragged by, they dropped until it was even money.

Agsk itself began to be worried. It was one thing to make a big, expensive splurge to impress the Galaxy and to hasten its acceptance into full membership in the Federation, but nobody had expected the show to last more than a few days. If it kept on much longer, Agsk would be bankrupt.

For the trial had foundered on one insoluble problem: the only way The Eel could ever be punished by their laws was to kill the

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person he most loved — and nobody could discover that he had ever loved anybody.

His mother? His father? He had been an undutiful and unaffectionate son, and his parents were long since dead in any case. He had never had a brother, a sister, a wife or a child. No probing could find any woman with whom he had ever been in love. He had never had an intimate friend.

He did nothing to help, naturally. He simply sat in his chains and smiled and waited. He was perfectly willing to be escorted from the court every evening, relieved of his fetters and placed in his pit. It was a much pleasanter existence than being executed inch by inch by the Medorans. For all he cared, the Agskians could go on spending their planetary income until he finally died of old age.

The priestess-judge and her coadjutors wore themselves out in discussions far into the night. They lost up to 15 pounds apiece, which on Agsk, where the average weight of adults is about 40, was serious. It began to look as if The Eel's judges would predecease him.

Whom did The Eel love? They went into minutiae and subterfuges. He had never had a pet to which he was devoted. He had never even loved a house which could be razed. He could not be said to have loved the immense fortune he had stolen, for he had concealed his wealth and used little of it, and in any event it had all been confiscated and, so far as possible, restored proportionately to those he had robbed.

What he had loved most, doubtless, was his prowess in stealing unimaginable sums and getting away with it — but there is no way of "killing" a criminal technique.

ALMOST a year had passed. Agsk was beginning to wish The Eel had never been caught, or that they had never been awarded the glory of trying him.

At last the priestess-judge, in utter despair, took off her judge's robes, put on the cassock and surplice of her sacred calling, and laid the problem before the most unapproachable and august of the gods of Agsk.

The trial was suspended while she lay for three days in a trance on the high altar. She emerged weak and tottering, her skin light blue instead of its healthy purple, but her head high and her mouth curved in triumph.

At sight of her, renewed excitement surged through the audience. News-gatherers, who had been finding it difficult of late to get anything to report, rushed to their instruments.

"Remove the defendant's chains and set him free," the priestess-judge ordered in ringing tones. "The Great God of the Unspeak-

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able Name has revealed to me whom the defendant most loves. As soon as he is freed, seize him and slay him. For the only being he loves is—himself."

There was an instant's silence, and then a roar. The Medorans howled in frustration.

But The Eel, still guarded but unchained, stood up and laughed aloud.

"Your Great God is a fool!" he said blasphemously. "I deny that I love myself. I care nothing for myself at all."

The priestess-judge sighed. "Since this is your sworn denial, it must be true," she said. "So then we cannot kill you. Instead, we grant that you do indeed love no one. Therefore you are a creature so far outside our comprehension that you cannot come under our laws, no matter how you have broken them. We shall notify the Federation that we abandon our jurisdiction and hand you over to our sister-planet which is next in line to judge you."

Then all the viewers on tridimens on countless planets saw something that nobody had ever thought to see — The Eel's armor of self-confidence cracked and terror poured through the gap.

He dropped to his knees and cried: "Wait! Wait! I confess that I blasphemed your god, but without realizing that I did!"

"You mean," pressed the priestess-judge, "you acknowledge that you yourself are the only being dear to you?"

"No, not that, either. Until now, I have never known love. But now it has come upon me like a nova and I must speak the truth." He paused, still on his knees, and looked piteously at the priestess-judge. "Are — are you bound by your law to — to believe me and to kill, instead of me, this — this being I adore?"

"We are so bound," she stated.

"Then," said The Eel, smiling and confident again, rising to his feet, "before all the Galaxy, I must declare the object of my sudden but everlasting passion. Great lady, it is you!"

THE Eel is still in his pit, which has been made most comfortable by his sympathizers, while the Council of the Galactic Federation seeks feverishly and vainly, year after year, to find some legal way out of the impasse.

Agsk, however, requests all Federation citizens to submit solutions, the grand prize for a workable answer being a lifetime term as president of the planet. A secondary contest (prize: lifetime ambassadorship to the Galactic Federation) is offered for a legal way around the statute barring criminals (specifically The Eel) from entering the primary contest.

— MIRIAM ALLEN DeFORD

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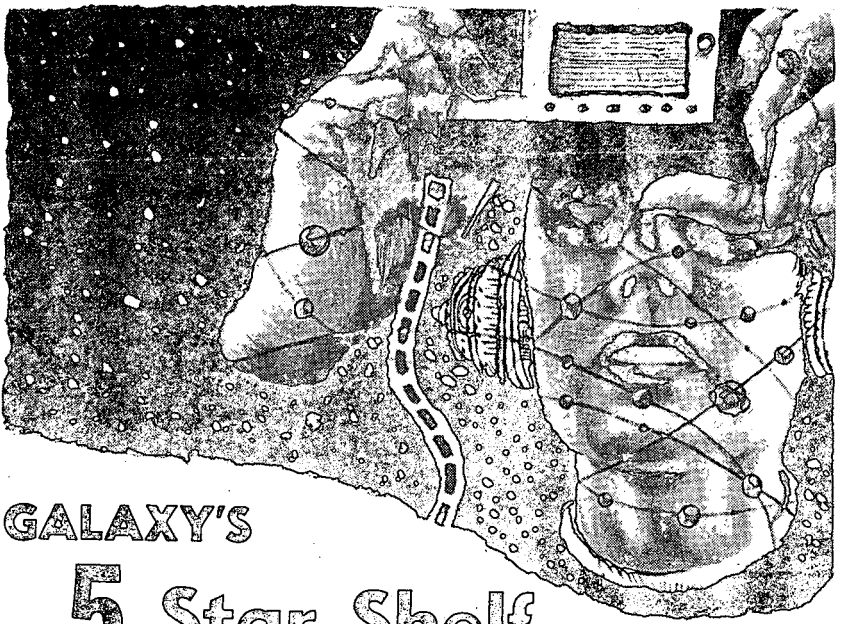

GALAXY'S 5 Star Shelf

ROCKETS, MISSILES AND SPACE TRAVEL by Willy Ley. Viking Press, N. Y., $6.75

THE third revision and twelfth printing of this rightfully famous work which first appeared before I took over this column gives me at last the opportunity to comment. The best known of all works in its field, it holds its unique position against all latecomers. Let me put it this way — the book couldn't have chosen a better author.

Ley was in on the very beginnings of German rocketry, a story-book episode that bears strange resemblance to the fantastic early days of American SF fandom. The same blind devotion, utter zeal and ignorance of the facts of life prevailed. But from these comic and sometime tragic early days came Sputnik and its blood relatives.

A copiously illustrated, utterly fascinating and authoritative history of its subject from yesterday through tomorrow.

SEA SIEGE by Andre Norton. Harcourt, Brace and Co., N. Y., $3.00

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FRANKLY, Miss Norton's latest book is difficult to evaluate from a juvenile viewpoint. At virtually no time is the young hero master of his own destiny. He is carried along by forces beyond his control. Far from a failing to me, but I can't say — I'm no kid any more.

Griffith Gunston, an American youth, is unhappily stationed on San Isadore, a bleak British West Indian island with his ichthyologist father, who is studying a red radioactive scum that is killing millions of fish.

The scum and the disappearances of crews of sailing vessels *á la Marie Celeste* are unofficially attributed to the Russians, but the natives credit devils, particularly after an unclassifiable monster is washed up on the beach. In addition, deadly stonefish appearing half a world away from their normal habitat, and octopi suddenly more organized and perceptive, add to the islanders' fears. They come close to rebellion during the establishment of a secret American naval base.

Midway through the book, the island is isolated by atomic warfare between East and West. Basic survival becomes paramount. Flood, fallout and earthquake are major enemies.

At no time does Miss Norton soften her stark picture of an island in torment and people in travail. That's why I hesitate. Juvenile? Maybe so, but absorbing adult fare, also.

RADIATION by Jack Schubert, Ph.D., and Ralph E. Lapp, Ph.D. Viking Press, N. Y., $3.95

I RECOMMENDED recently that *On The Beach,* a work of fiction, be made required reading for mankind's policy-makers. The same should hold for this authoritative book, which dispels innumerable illusions that you, I and certainly *They* have concerning radiation. If anyone can read it with equanimity, then he is either hermit or Hottentot.

Subtitled "What it is and how it affects you," the book treats of the obvious, the A- and H-bombs and the less obvious, more insidious, the X-ray and fluoroscope. It tells of the frightful results of the frivolous use of X-rays for depilation in the '20's, the well-known cases of poisoning in the watchdial factories and the less publicized cases resulting from careless fluoroscopy. It warns of the dangers of the new radioisotopes and ill-advised radiation therapy.

In short, Schubert and Lapp have done an eye-opening job. It should reach the right eyes.

DANDELION WINE by Ray Bradbury. Doubleday and Co., N. Y., $3.95

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ALTHOUGH not ostensibly a fantasy, this account of a summer in the life of a twelve-year-old boy can hardly be anything else, as anyone who ever was a twelve-year-old will agree. While there are those who condemn Bradbury for his frequent nostalgic excursions into adolescence, it must be agreed that he knows the wonderful workings of child minds better than most writers since Twain and Tarkington.

Douglas Spalding and younger brother Tom are the central figures, but entire episodes are woven about others: Grandpa and the lawn-mower; the death of Great-grandma; Grandma and her rule-of-thumb cookery. For sheer fantasy, there is jeweler Leo Auffmann's near-tragic invention of the Happiness Machine, and Charlie Woodman's honest-to-goodness Time Machine.

Admirers of Bradbury will welcome this tender volume and even his decriers will find passages of pure evocative magic to soften their flinty hearts.

MODERN APPLIED PHOTOGRAPHY by G. A. Jones. Philosophical Library, N. Y., $4.75

THE average citizen looks upon photography as an instrument of enjoyment or communication, but seldom as a technical tool. However, photography has become so much a part of research that it is impossible to visualize certain sciences without it. Virtually no visual observation is carried out in astronomy except by amateurs. Infra-red, ultra-violet, X-ray, spectrographic and microphotography are integral parts of numerous sciences.

Jones' book dramatizes the importance of a versatile and immensely important art.

THE NEXT FIFTY BILLION YEARS by Kenneth Heuer. Viking Press, N. Y., $3.00

HEUER is a Fellow of the RAS and for five years lecturer at the Hayden Planetarium. He has revised an earlier book titled *The End of the World*, material for which he took mainly from the most popular theme of the same name at the planetarium. The present volume is considerably more optimistic, hence the change of title.

Various possible finishes to the Earth envisioned are cosmic collisions, death of the Moon, kidnapping of Earth by another sun, a white dwarf star approaching too close, the Sun becoming a nova, and the death of the Sun. However, as you can see by the title, Heuer foresees a long, if not happy, tomorrow for us if we don't do something rash today.

Chesley Bonestell's impressive-

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ly photographic drawings add visual impact.

PEOPLE MINUS X by Raymond Z. Gallun. Simon and Schuster, N. Y., $3.00

TO oldtimers, Gallun is a conjuring name. His "Old Faithful" remains a classic in the field to this day. Unfortunately, he is also capable of turning out an incredibly bad story, as here.

His theme is natural human against android, but he has added a new touch. In the event of an individual's destruction, his body can be perfectly reproduced from an original pattern, thus circumventing death. If the pattern is destroyed, he can be reproduced from the memories of family and friends.

This makes for interesting plot possibilities, since no man is the same to any two associates but, aside from a brief and unsatisfactorily melodramatic use of this potentially amusing or dramatic device, Gallun employs as dated and artificial a plot as anything from the antediluvian days of SF.

The Moon has blown up in an enormous cataclysm as a result of dangerous experiments being conducted there. The only scientist of note to escape is the discoverer of the process of artificial reproduction. An enormous segment of Earth's population is destroyed although most are replaceable due to his discovery. Meanwhile, humanity has reacted with a psychopathic hatred of scientists, so that he is forced into hiding.

There are the seeds of a good yarn scattered throughout, but Gallun has done an almost complete job of plowing under the harvest.

— FLOYD C. GALE

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

With NEVER COME MIDNIGHT, next month's novella, Christopher Grimm fulfills the promise of powerful storytelling drive shown in "Bodyguard," his first *Galaxy* story. A little something about the plot? Judge for yourself how difficult that would be . . . the son of an Earthman and an alien female, *two races that cannot interbreed,* comes to Terra to collect his inheritance . . . and proves that he is completely and legitimately entitled to it! From then on, the plot gets *really* tricky!

Along with at least one novelet, short stories and our regular features, Willy Ley presents FOR YOUR INFORMATION the very latest news about a huge prehistoric body of water. Not footnotes from the past, but headlines of the present, for the "Remnants of the Sarmatian Sea" are very much in evidence right now and urgently need understanding of their yesterday, today and tomorrow.

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Old Rambling House

By FRANK HERBERT

All the Grahams desired was a home they could call their own . . . but what did the home want?

Illustrated by JOHNSON

ON his last night on Earth, Ted Graham stepped out of a glass-walled telephone booth, ducked to avoid a swooping moth that battered itself in a frenzy against a bare globe above the booth.

Ted Graham was a long-necked man with a head of pronounced egg shape topped by prematurely balding sandy hair. Something about his lanky, intense appearance suggested his occupation: certified public accountant.

He stopped behind his wife, who was studying a newspaper classified page, and frowned. "They said to wait here. They'll come get us. Said the place is hard to find at night."

Martha Graham looked up from the newspaper. She was a doll-faced woman, heavily pregnant, a kind of pink prettiness about her. The yellow glow from the light above the booth subdued the red-

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auburn cast of her ponytail hair.

"I just *have* to be in a house when the baby's born," she said. "What'd they sound like?"

"I dunno. There was a funny kind of interruption—like an argument in some foreign language."

"Did they sound foreign?"

"In a way." He motioned along the night-shrouded line of trailers toward one with two windows glowing amber. "Let's wait inside. These bugs out here are fierce."

"Did you tell them which trailer is ours?"

"Yes. They didn't sound at all anxious to look at it. That's odd—them wanting to trade their house for a trailer."

"There's nothing odd about it. They've probably just got itchy feet like we did."

He appeared not to hear her. "Funniest-sounding language you ever heard when that argument started—like a squirt of noise."

INSIDE the trailer, Ted Graham sat down on the green couch that opened into a double bed for company.

"They could use a good tax accountant around here," he said. "When I first saw the place, I got that definite feeling. The valley looks prosperous. It's a wonder nobody's opened an office here before."

His wife took a straight chair by the counter separating kitchen and living area, folded her hands across her heavy stomach.

"I'm just continental tired of wheels going around under me," she said. "I want to sit and stare at the same view for the rest of my life. I don't know how a trailer ever seemed glamorous when—"

"It was the inheritance gave us itchy feet," he said.

Tires gritted on gravel outside.

Martha Graham straightened. "Could that be them?"

"Awful quick, if it is." He went to the door, opened it, stared down at the man who was just raising a hand to knock.

"Are you Mr. Graham?" asked the man.

"Yes." He found himself staring at the caller.

"I'm Clint Rush. You called about the house?" The man moved farther into the light. At first, he'd appeared an old man, fine wrinkle lines in his face, a tired leather look to his skin. But as he moved his head in the light, the wrinkles seemed to dissolve—and with them, the years lifted from him.

"Yes, we called," said Ted Graham. He stood aside. "Do you want to look at the trailer now?"

Martha Graham crossed to stand beside her husband. "We've kept it in awfully good shape," she said. "We've never let anything get seriously wrong with it."

She sounds too anxious, thought Ted Graham. *I wish she'd let me*

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do the talking for the two of us.

"We can come back and look at your trailer tomorrow in daylight," said Rush. "My car's right out here, if you'd like to see our house."

Ted Graham hesitated. He felt a nagging worry tug at his mind, tried to fix his attention on what bothered him.

"Hadn't we better take our car?" he asked. "We could follow you."

"No need," said Rush. "We're coming back into town tonight anyway. We can drop you off then."

Ted Graham nodded. "Be right with you as soon as I lock up."

Inside the car, Rush mumbled introductions. His wife was a dark shadow in the front seat, her hair drawn back in a severe bun. Her features suggested gypsy blood. He called her Raimee.

Odd name, thought Ted Graham. And he noticed that she, too, gave that strange first impression of age that melted in a shift of light.

Mrs. Rush turned her gypsy features toward Martha Graham. "You are going to have a baby?"

It came out as an odd, veiled statement.

Abruptly, the car rolled forward.

Martha Graham said, "It's supposed to be born in about two months. We hope it's a boy."

Mrs. Rush looked at her husband. "I have changed my mind," she said.

Rush spoke without taking his attention from the road. "It is too . . ." He broke off, spoke in a tumble of strange sounds.

Ted Graham recognized it as the language he'd heard on the telephone.

Mrs. Rush answered in the same tongue; anger showing in the intensity of her voice. Her husband replied, his voice calmer.

Presently, Mrs. Rush fell moodily silent.

Rush tipped his head toward the rear of the car. "My wife has moments when she does not want to get rid of the old house. It has been with her for many years."

Ted Graham said, "Oh." Then: "Are you Spanish?"

Rush hesitated. "No. We are Basque."

He turned the car down a well-lighted avenue that merged into a highway. They turned onto a side road. There followed more turns—left, right, right.

Ted Graham lost track.

They hit a jolting bump that made Martha gasp.

"I hope that wasn't too rough on you," said Rush. "We're almost there."

THE car swung into a lane, its lights picking out the skeleton outlines of trees: peculiar trees—tall, gaunt, leafless. They added to

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Ted Graham's feeling of uneasiness.

The lane dipped, ended at a low wall of a house—red brick with clerestory windows beneath overhanging eaves. The effect of the wall and a wide-beamed door they could see to the left was ultramodern.

Ted Graham helped his wife out of the car, followed the Rushes to the door.

"I thought you told me it was an old house," he said.

"It was designed by one of the first modernists," said Rush. He fumbled with an odd curved key. The wide door swung open onto a hallway equally wide, carpeted by a deep pile rug. They could glimpse floor-to-ceiling view windows at the end of the hall, city lights beyond.

Martha Graham gasped, entered the hall as though in a trance. Ted Graham followed, heard the door close behind them.

"It's so—so—so *big*," exclaimed Martha Graham.

"You want to trade *this* for our trailer?" asked Ted Graham.

"It's too inconvenient for us," said Rush. "My work is over the mountains on the coast." He shrugged. "We cannot sell it."

Ted Graham looked at him sharply. "Isn't there any money around here?" He had a sudden vision of a tax accountant with no customers.

"Plenty of money, but no real estate customers."

They entered the living room. Sectional divans lined the walls. Subdued lighting glowed from the corners. Two paintings hung on the opposite walls—oblongs of odd lines and twists that made Ted Graham dizzy.

Warning bells clamored in his mind.

MARTHA Graham crossed to the windows, looked at the lights far away below. "I had no idea we'd climbed that far," she said. "It's like a fairy city."

Mrs. Rush emitted a short, nervous laugh.

Ted Graham glanced around the room, thought: *If the rest of the house is like this, it's worth fifty or sixty thousand.* He thought of the trailer: *A good one, but not worth more than seven thousand.*

Uneasiness was like a neon sign flashing in his mind. "This seems so . . . " He shook his head.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house?" asked Rush.

Martha Graham turned from the window. "Oh, yes."

Ted Graham shrugged. *No harm in looking,* he thought.

When they returned to the living room, Ted Graham had doubled his previous estimate on the house's value. His brain reeled with the summing of it: a solarium with an entire ceiling covered by

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sun lamps, an automatic laundry where you dropped soiled clothing down a chute, took it washed and ironed from the other end . . .

"Perhaps you and your wife would like to discuss it in private," said Rush. "We will leave you for a moment."

And they were gone before Ted Graham could protest.

Martha Graham said, "Ted, I honestly never in my life dreamed—"

"Something's very wrong, honey."

"But, Ted—"

"This house is worth at least a hundred thousand dollars. Maybe more. And they want to trade *this*—" he looked around him—"for a seven-thousand-dollar trailer?"

"Ted, they're foreigners. And if they're so foolish they don't know the value of this place, then why should—"

"I don't like it," he said. Again he looked around the room, recalled the fantastic equipment of the house. "But maybe you're right."

He stared out at the city lights. They had a lacelike quality: tall buildings linked by lines of flickering incandescence. Something like a Roman candle shot skyward in the distance.

"Okay!" he said. "If they want to trade, let's go push the deal . . ."

Abruptly, the house shuddered. The city lights blinked out. A humming sound filled the air.

Martha Graham clutched her husband's arm. "Ted! Wha— what was that?"

"I dunno." He turned. "Mr. Rush!"

No answer. Only the humming.

The door at the end of the room opened. A strange man came through it. He wore a short toga-like garment of gray, metallic cloth belted at the waist by something that glittered and shimmered through every color of the spectrum. An aura of coldness and power emanated from him—a sense of untouchable hauteur.

HE glanced around the room, spoke in the same tongue the Rushes had used.

Ted Graham said, "I don't understand you, mister."

The man put a hand to his flickering belt. Both Ted and Martha Graham felt themselves rooted to the floor, a tingling sensation vibrating along every nerve.

Again the strange language rolled from the man's tongue, but now the words were understood.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Graham. This is my wife. What's going—"

"How did you get here?"

"The Rushes—they wanted to trade us this house for our trailer. They brought us. Now look, we—"

"What is your talent—your occupation?"

"Tax accountant. Say! Why all these—"

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"That was to be expected," said the man. "Clever! Oh, excessively clever!" His hand moved again to the belt. "Now be very quiet. This may confuse you momentarily."

Colored lights filled both the Grahams' minds. They staggered.

"You are qualified," said the man. "You will serve."

"Where are we?" demanded Martha Graham.

"The coordinates would not be intelligible to you," he said. "I am of the Rojac. It is sufficient for you to know that you are under Rojac sovereignty."

TED Graham said, "But—"

"You have, in a way, been kidnapped. And the Raimees have fled to your planet—an unregistered planet."

"I'm afraid," Martha Graham said shakily.

"You have nothing to fear," said the man. "You are no longer on the planet of your birth—nor even in the same galaxy." He glanced at Ted Graham's wrist. "That device on your wrist—it tells your local time?"

"Yes."

"That will help in the search. And your sun—can you describe its atomic cycle?"

Ted Graham groped in his mind for his science memories from school, from the Sunday supplements. "I can recall that our galaxy is a spiral like—"

"Most galaxies are spiral."

"Is this some kind of a practical joke?" asked Ted Graham.

The man smiled, a cold, superior smile. "It is no joke. Now I will make you a proposition."

Ted nodded warily. "All right, let's have the stinger."

"The people who brought you here were tax collectors we Rojac recruited from a subject planet. They were conditioned to make it impossible for them to leave their job untended. Unfortunately, they were clever enough to realize that if they brought someone else in who could do their job, they were released from their mental bonds. Very clever."

"But—"

"You may have their job," said the man. "Normally, you would be put to work in the lower echelons, but we believe in meting out justice wherever possible. The Raimees undoubtedly stumbled on your planet by accident and lured you into this position without—"

"How do you know I can do your job?"

"That moment of brilliance was an aptitude test. You passed. Well, do you accept?"

"What about our baby?" Martha Graham worriedly wanted to know.

"You will be allowed to keep it until it reaches the age of decision—about the time it will take the child to reach adult stature."

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OLD RAMBLING HOUSE

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"Then what?" insisted Martha Graham.

"The child will take its position in society—according to its ability."

"Will we ever see our child after that?"

"Possibly."

Ted Graham said, "What's the joker in this?"

Again the cold, superior smile. "You will receive conditioning similar to that which we gave the Raimees. And we will want to examine your memories to aid us in our search for your planet. It would be good to find a new inhabitable place."

"Why did they trap us like this?" asked Martha Graham.

"It's lonely work," the man explained. "Your house is actually a type of space conveyance that travels along your collection route —and there is much travel to the job. And then—you will not have friends, nor time for much other than work. Our methods are necessarily severe at times."

"*Travel?*" Martha Graham repeated in dismay.

"Almost constantly."

Ted Graham felt his mind whirling. And behind him, he heard his wife sobbing.

THE Raimees sat in what had been the Grahams' trailer.

"For a few moments, I feared he would not succumb to the bait," she said. "I knew you could never overcome the mental compulsion enough to leave them there without their first agreeing."

Raimee chuckled. "Yes. And now I'm going to indulge in everything the Rojac never permitted. I'm going to write ballads and poems."

"And I'm going to paint," she said. "Oh, the delicious freedom!"

"Greed won this for us," he said. "The long study of the Grahams paid off. They couldn't refuse to trade."

"I knew they'd agree. The looks in their eyes when they saw the house! They both had . . ." She broke off, a look of horror coming into her eyes. "One of them did not agree!"

"They both did. You heard them."

"The baby?"

He stared at his wife. "But—but it is not at the age of decision!"

"In perhaps eighteen of this planet's years, it *will* be at the age of decision. What then?"

His shoulders sagged. He shuddered. "I will not be able to fight it off. I will have to build a transmitter, call the Rojac and confess!"

"And they will collect another inhabitable place," she said, her voice flat and toneless.

"I've spoiled it," he said. "I've spoiled it!"

— FRANK HERBERT

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(*Continued from page 4*)
the average — his reading covers everything scientific, social, political, economic and what not, mined for him by perhaps the sharpest researchers in the world.

The development of a theme into a story is done by extrapolation. That's a clumsy and forbidding word; I hope somebody can offer a neater, more easily understood one. It's the process of carrying out data to the most ultimate and logical conclusion possible, and is used by economists, statisticians—yourself, for that matter, if you have to file a report of estimated income with the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Of course the average science fiction reader is shrewder at extrapolation than the average — he's been guided and stimulated by perhaps the best in the world.

Resourcefully imaginative research and daringly creative extrapolation, these are two of the qualities that make science fiction a prime recruiter of future scientists, technicians and engineers — the free world's greatest need. Proof: our second largest sale in proportion to population is in university towns. And they mostly stay with science fiction: our largest sale in proportion to population is in towns where scientific installations are the principal industry. There may be some whose interest wasn't first aroused by science fiction, but our surveys have not found them.

Entertainment, remember, based on research and extrapolation — plus something that is true of science fiction and no other literature: crag-leaping.

Extrapolation climbs as far as it can, clear to the furthest limits. But those limits inevitably become limiting. When that happens, a leap is needed off the top of the old crag to the base of a new one. Not hanging on with one hand while reaching with the other. A fast, nervy jump, with the crag-hangers laughing — until the safe landing.

There are many examples, but I am fond of one: gravity hampered Wells, so he abolished it. Verne jeered; he'd used scientifically sound cannon propulsion. Verne's idea never was used, never will be. An anti-gravity research program sees success in 40 years. A conservative estimate — it probably will be much before that.

Crag-leaping is creative science, creative science fiction both. With only research and extrapolation, we'd still be living in caves, using flint arrows — each the ultimate.

Come about or not, that isn't the point. Most experiments don't — till one does. Even then, it is the leap that counts. That's the real contribution of basic science and science fiction.

— H. L. GOLD

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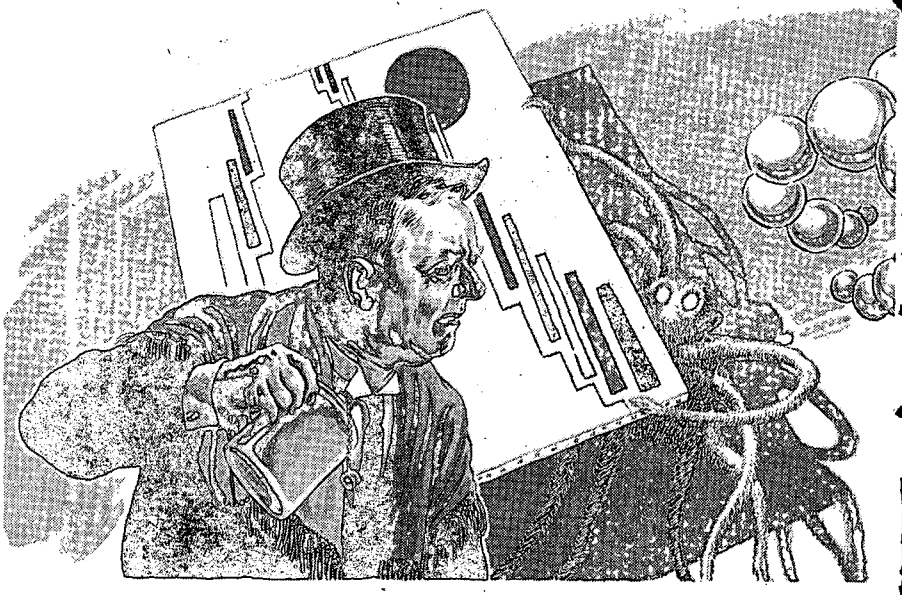

THE BIG TIME

By FRITZ LEIBER

Concluding a 2-part serial

Safe outside the cosmos, the Place gave refuge to Soldiers after their raids on history . . . but now mutiny had turned it into a bomb in a bag!

SYNOPSIS

LET me bring you up to date fast. My name is Greta Forzane and I'm a combination party girl and psychiatric aide, working in a midget universe about a half a block across and outside the universe you do your living in. My job is to

Illustrated by FINLAY

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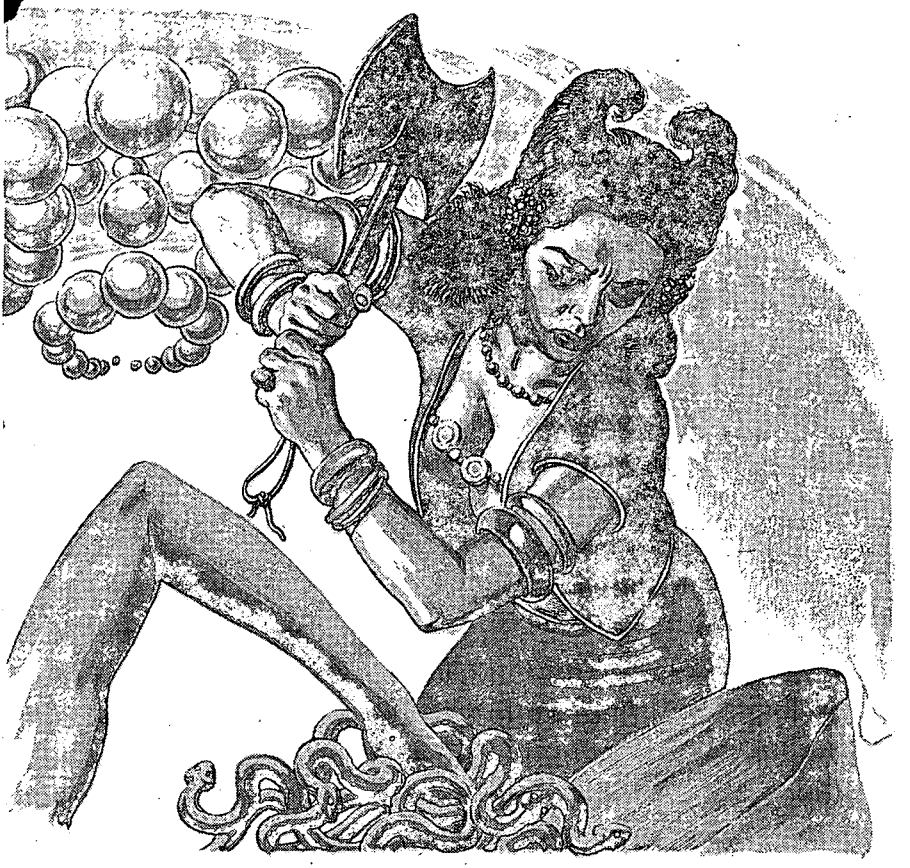

entertain Soldiers who've been driven half nuts in the Change War, which is a war of two mysterious time-traveling powers called the Spiders (our side) and the Snakes (the enemy). Our Soldiers fight by going back to change the past, or ahead to change the future, in ways to help the Spiders beat the Snakes.

History's already been changed a lot from what you know it: the Nazis win World War Two and rule an empire stretching from Siberia to Kansas, the American Civil War never occurred, and the Roman Empire got licked just as it was getting started two thousand years ago.

I used to live in Chicago, as hu-

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man as you, or more so, but when I died I got Resurrected, as we call it, and recruited onto the Big Time by the Spiders. My co-workers are Sid Lessingham, a bully-boy from Shakespeare's England; Beau Lassiter, a Mississippi gambler from the Greater South; Doc Pyeshkov, a drunken medico from a Russia that didn't have any Revolution and got conquered by the Nazis; Maud Davies, a starship girl born on Ganymede some centuries in the future; and Lily Foster, an English girl who lost her big love, a poet named Bruce Marchant, in World War One and then took to drink and whoopee. All dead and Resurrected, of course.

The midget universe we Entertainers work in is fixed up like a nightclub and we just call it the Place. Two little instruments that look like portable radios — the Major and Minor Maintainers — keep it going and in contact with ordinary space-time.

I'D been working in the Place on the Big Time about a year or so when three Soldiers turned up uniformed as Black Hussars and fresh from an operation in old St. Petersburg. I knew one of them real well and was even sweet on him: Erich von Hohenwald, a commandant from the victorious Nazi empire. The other two were new to me: a Roman legate named Mark and a young English lieutenant from World War One who turned out to be Lily's old heartthrob Bruce Marchant.

This Bruce was in a tearing rage, believe it or not, because he'd been accidentally issued two left-hand gloves with his uniform, and he started a big gripe and got in a fight with Erich, but Lily found him a right-hand glove and he simmered down and began to enjoy the party.

But just then the Major Maintainer blinked an SOS and we had to pick up three more Spiders: a fighting girl named Kaby from old Crete; a Lunan octopoid from way back called Ilhilihis — which I shorten to Illy because he's an old pal; and Sevensee, a Venusian satyr from way in the future. They had a fancy big casket with them and had been through a peck of troubles.

Sid tried to get the party going again by animating a couple of Ghostgirls, which are phantom women who ordinarily don't occupy much space and we keep them around in case we get crowds. These two Ghostgirls were an Austrian countess and a Greek cutie named Phryne.

But Kaby spilled the news that the fancy chest had inside it a tactical atomic bomb, which we were supposed to plant in Egypt back in Roman times, so the Romans would win a battle from the Parthians and not be lost to history.

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This bomb business started a minor panic in the Place. Bruce jumped on top of the bar and did a good British job of calming us down, but then he went on to give us a long spiel about what miserable lives we led as Soldiers and Entertainers, and how the Change War was destroying the whole universe, and how we didn't know who the real Spiders were who were our bosses any more than we had any idea of the identity of the real Snakes.

First thing we knew then, Bruce was asking us to start a mutiny against the High Command and drag into it all the other Soldiers and Entertainers we could, Spiders and Snakes alike. My Nazi boy friend Erich got shouting angry and stood up on the bomb chest and tried to quash the mutiny, but it came to a showdown. Beau, Doc, the satyr and Lily declared for Bruce and mutiny, while Mark, Kaby, Maud and Illy sided with Erich.

Bruce had just got around to putting the question to me, which embarrassed me no end. Sid, boss of the Place and my special friend, hadn't declared himself either. I knew I was going to have to take sides, though I didn't want to, when I happened to look around and saw that the two Ghostgirls had disappeared--and the Major Maintainer with them — the thing that kept the Place in existence!

CHAPTER 9

"We examined the moss between the bricks, and found it undisturbed."

"You looked among D——'s papers, of course, and into the books of the library?"

"Certainly; we opened every package and parcel; we not only opened every book, but we turned over every leaf in each volume..."

—Poe

A LOCKED ROOM

THREE hours later, Sid and I plumped down on the couch nearest the kitchen, though too tired to want to eat for a while yet. A tighter search than I could ever have cooked up had shown that the Maintainer was not in the Place.

Of course it had to be in the Place, as we kept telling each other for the first two hours. It had to be, if circumstances and the theories we lived by in the Change World meant anything. A Maintainer is what maintains a Place. The Minor Maintainer takes care of oxygen, temperature, humidity, gravity, and other little life-cycle and matter-cycle things generally, but it's the Major Maintainer that keeps the walls from buckling and the ceiling from falling in. It is little, but oh my, it does so much.

It doesn't work by wires or radio or anything complicated like that.

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It just hooks into local space-time.

I have been told that its inside working part is made up of vastly tough, vastly hard giant molecules, each one of which is practically a vest-pocket cosmos in itself. Outside, it looks like a portable radio with a few more dials and some telltales and switches and plug-ins for earphones and a lot of other sensory thing-umajigs.

But the Maintainer was gone and the Void hadn't closed in, yet. By this time, I was so fagged, I didn't care much whether it did or not.

One thing for sure, the Maintainer had been switched to Introvert before it was spirited away or else its disappearance automatically produced Introversion, take your choice, because we sure were Introverted — real nasty martinet-schoolmaster grip of reality on my thoughts that I knew, without trying, liquor wouldn't soften, not a breath of Change Wind, alsolutely stifling, and the gray of the Void seeming so much inside my head that I think I got a glimmering of what the science boys mean when they explain to me that the Place is a kind of interweaving of the material and the mental — a Giant Monad, one of them called it.

Anyway, I said to myself, "Greta, if this is Introversion, I want no part of it. It is not nice to be cut adrift from the cosmos and know it. A lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific and a starship between galaxies are not in it for loneliness."

I ASKED myself why the Spiders had ever equipped Maintainers with Introversion switches anyway, when we couldn't drill with them and weren't supposed to use them except in an emergency so tight that it was either Introvert or surrender to the Snakes, and for the first time the obvious explanation came to me:

Introversion must be the same as scuttling, its main purpose to withhold secrets and materiel from the enemy. It put a place into a situation from which even the Spider high command couldn't rescue it, and there was nothing left but to sink down, down (out? up?), down into the Void.

If that was the case, our chances of getting back were about those of my being a kid again playing in the Dunes on the Small Time.

I edged a little closer to Sid and sort of squunched under his shoulder and rubbed my cheek against the smudged, gold-worked gray velvet. He looked down and I said, "A long way to Lynn Regis, eh, Siddy?"

"Sweetling, thou spokest a mouthful," he said. He knows very well what he is doing when he

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mixes his language that way, the wicked old darling.

"Siddy," I said, "why this goldwork? It'd be a lot smoother without it."

"Marry, men must prick themselves out and, 'faith I know not, but it helps if there's metal in it."

"And girls get scratched." I took a little sniff. "But don't put this doublet through the cleaner yet. Until we get out of the woods, I want as much you around as possible."

"Marry, and why should I?" he asked blankly, and I think he wasn't fooling me. The last thing time travelers find out is how they do or don't smell. Then his face clouded and he looked as though he wanted to squunch under my shoulder. "But 'faith, sweetling, your forest has a few more trees than Sherwood."

"Thou saidst it," I agreed, and wondered about the look. He oughtn't to be interested in my girlishness now. I knew I was a mess, but he had stuck pretty close to me during the hunt and you never can tell. Then I remembered that he was the other one who hadn't declared himself when Bruce was putting it to us, and it probably troubled his male vanity. Not me, though — I was still grateful to the Maintainer for getting me out of that spot, whatever other it had got us all into. It seemed ages ago.

WE'D all jumped to the conclusion that the two Ghostgirls had run away with the Maintainer, I don't know where or why, but it looked so much that way. Maud had started yiping about how she'd never trusted Ghosts and always known that some day they'd start doing things on their own, and Kaby had got it firmly fixed in her head, right between the horns, that Phryne, being a Greek, was the ringleader and was going to wreak havoc on us all.

But when we were checking Stores the first time, I had noticed that the Ghostgirl envelopes looked flat. Ectoplasm doesn't take up much space when it's folded, but I had opened one anyway, then another, and then called for help.

Every last envelope was empty. We had lost over a thousand Ghostgirls, Sid's whole stock.

Well, at least it proved what none of us had ever seen or heard of being demonstrated: that there is a spooky link — a sort of Change Wind contact — between a Ghost and its lifeline; and when that umbilicus, I've heard it called, is cut, the part away from the lifeline dies.

Interesting, but what had bothered me was whether we Demons were going to evaporate too, because we are as much Doublegangers as the Ghosts and our apron strings had been cut just as surely. We're more solid, of course, but

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that would only mean we'd take a little longer. Very logical.

I remember I had looked up at Lili and Maud — us girls had been checking the envelopes; it's one of the proprieties we frequently maintain and anyway, if men check them, they're apt to trot out that old wheeze about "instant women" which I'm sick to death of hearing, thank you.

Anyway, I had looked up and said, "It's been nice knowing you," and Lili had said, "Twenty-three, skiddoo," and Maud had said, "Here goes nothing," and we had shook hands all around.

We figured that Phryne and the Countess had faded at the same time as the other Ghostgirls, but an idea had been nibbling at me and I said, "Siddy, do you suppose it's just barely possible that, while we were all looking at Bruce, those two Ghostgirls would have been able to work the Maintainer and get a Door and lam out of here with the thing?"

"Thou speakst my thoughts, sweetling. All weighs against it: Imprimis, 'tis well known that Ghosts cannot lay plots or act on them. Secundo, the time forbade getting a Door. Tercio—and here's the real meat of it — the Place folds without the Maintainer. Quadro, 'twere folly to depend on not one of — how many of us? ten, elf — not looking around in all the time it would have taken them—"

"I looked around once, Siddy. They were drinking and they had got to the control divan under their own power. Now when was that? Oh, yes, when Bruce was talking about Zombies."

"Yes, sweetling. And as I was about to cap my argument with quinquo when you 'gan prattle, I could have sworn none could touch the Maintainer, much less work it and purloin it, without my certain knowledge. Yet . . ."

"Eftsoons yet," I seconded him.

SOMEBODY must have got a door and walked out with the thing. It certainly wasn't in the Place. The hunt had been a lulu. Something the size of a portable typewriter is not easy to hide and we had been inside everything from Beau's piano to the renewer link of the Refresher.

We had even fluoroscoped everybody, though it had made Illy writhe like a box of worms, as he'd warned us; he said it tickled terribly and I insisted on smoothing his fur for five minutes afterward, although he was a little standoffish toward me.

Some areas, like the bar, kitchen and Stores, took a long while, but we were thorough. Kaby helped Doc check Surgery: since she last made the Place, she has been stationed in a Field Hospital (it turns out the Spiders actually are mounting operations from them) and

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learned a few nice new wrinkles.

However, Doc put in some honest work on his own, though, of course, every check was observed by at least three people, not including Bruce or Lili. When the Maintainer vanished, Doc had pulled out of his glassy-eyed drunk in a way that would have surprised me if I hadn't seen it happen to him before, but when we finished Surgery and got on to the Art Gallery, he had started to putter and I noticed him hold out his coat and duck his head and whip out a flask and take a swig and by now he was well on his way toward another peak.

The Art Gallery had taken time too, because there's such a jumble of strange stuff, and it broke my heart but Kaby took her ax and split a beautiful blue woodcarving of a Venusian medusa because, although there wasn't a mark in the paw-polished surface, she claimed it was just big enough. Doc cried a little and we left him fitting the pieces together and mooning over the other stuff.

After we'd finished everything else, Mark had insisted on tackling the floor. Beau and Sid both tried to explain to him how this is a one-sided Place, that there is nothing, but nothing, under the floor; it just gets a lot harder than the diamonds crusting it as soon as you get a quarter inch down — that being the solid equivalent of the Void. But Mark was knuckle-headed (like all Romans, Sid assured me on the q. t.) and broke four diamond-plus drills before he was satisfied.

Except for some trick hiding places, that left the Void, and things don't vanish if you throw them at the Void — they half melt and freeze forever unless you can fish them out. Back of the Refresher, at about eye-level, are three Venusian coconuts that a Hittite strongman threw there during a major brawl. I try not to look at them because they are so much like witch heads they give me the woolies. The parts of the Place right up against the Void have strange spatial properties which one of the gadgets in Surgery makes use of in a way that gives me the worse woolies, but that's beside the point.

DURING the hunt, Kaby and Erich had used their Callers as direction finders to point out the Maintainer, just as they're used in the cosmos to locate the Door — and sometimes in the Big Places, people tell me. But the Callers only went wild — like a compass needle whirling around without stopping — and nobody knew what that meant.

The trick hiding places were the Minor Maintainer, a cute idea, but it is no bigger than the Major and has its own mysterious insides and

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had obviously kept on doing its own work, so that was out for several reasons, and the bomb chest, though it seemed impossible for anyone to have opened it, granting they knew the secret of its lock, even before Erich jumped on it and put it in the limelight double. But when you've ruled out everything else, the word impossible changes meaning.

Since time travel is our business, a person might think of all sorts of tricks for sending the Maintainer into the past or future, permanently or temporarily. But the Place is strictly on the Big Time and everybody that should know tells me that time traveling *through* the Big Time is out. It's this way: the Big Time is a train, and the Little Time is the countryside and we're on the train, unless we go out a Door, and as Gertie Stein might put it, you can't time travel through the time you time travel in when you time travel.

I'd also played around with the idea of some fantastically obvious hiding place, maybe something that several people could pass back and forth between them, which would mean a conspiracy, and, of course, if you assume a big enough conspiracy, you can explain anything, including the cosmos itself. Still, I'd got a sort of shell-game idea about the Soldiers' three big black shakos and I hadn't been satisfied until I'd got the three together and looked in them all at the same time.

"Wake up, Greta, and take something. I can't stand here forever." Maud had brought us a tray of hearty snacks from then and yon, and I must say they were tempting; she whips up a mean hors d'oeuvre.

I looked them over and said, "Siddy, I want a hot dog."

"And I want a venison pasty! Out upon you, you finical jill, you o'erscrupulous jade, you whimsic and tyrannous poppet!"

I grabbed a handful and snuggled back against him.

"Go on, call me some more, Siddy," I told him. "Real juicy ones."

CHAPTER 10

My thought, whose murder yet is
but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man
that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and
nothing is
But what is not.

— Macbeth

MOTIVES AND OPPORTUNITIES

MY big bad waif from King's Lynn had set the tray on his knees and started to wolf the food down. The others were finishing up. Erich, Mark and Kaby were having a quietly furious ar-

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gument I couldn't overhear at the end of the bar nearest the bronze chest, and Illy was draped over the piano like a real octopus, listening in.

Beau and Sevensee were pacing up and down near the control divan and throwing each other a word now and then. Beyond them, Bruce and Lili were sitting on the opposite couch from us, talking earnestly about something. Maud had sat down at the other end of the bar and was knitting — it's one of the habits like chess and quiet drinking, or learning to talk by squeak box, that we pick up to pass the time in the Place in the long stretches between parties. Doc was fiddling around the Gallery, picking things up and setting them down, still managing to stay on his feet at any rate.

LILI and Bruce stood up, still gabbing intensely at each other, and Illy began to pick out with one tentacle a little tune in the high keys that didn't sound like anything on God's earth. "Where do they get all the energy?" I wondered.

As soon as I asked myself that, I knew the answer and I began to feel the same way myself. It wasn't energy; it was nerves, pure and simple.

Change is like a drug, I realized —you get used to the facts never staying the same, and one picture of the past and future dissolving into another maybe not very different but still different, and your mind being constantly goosed by strange moods and notions, like nightclub lights of shifting color with weird shadows between shining right on your brain.

The endless swaying and jogging is restful, like riding on a train.

You soon get to like the movement and to need it without knowing, and when it suddenly stops and you're just you and the facts you think from and feel from are exactly the same when you go back to them — boy, that's rough, as I found out now.

The instant we got Introverted, everything that ordinarily leaks into the Place, wake or sleep, had stopped coming, and we were nothing but ourselves and what we meant to each other and what we could make of that, an awfully lonely, scratchy situation.

I decided I felt like I'd been dropped into a swimming pool full of cement and held under until it hardened.

I could understand the others bouncing around a bit. It was a wonder they didn't hit the Void. Maud seemed to be standing it the best; maybe she'd got a little preparation from the long watches between stars; and then she is older than all of us, even Sid, though with a small "o" in "older."

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THE restless work of the search for the Maintainer had masked the feeling, but now it was beginning to come full force. Before the search, Bruce's speech and Erich's interruptions had done a passable masking job too. I tried to remember when I'd first got the feeling and decided it was after Erich had jumped on the bomb, about the time he mentioned poetry. Though I couldn't be sure. Maybe the Maintainer had been Introverted even earlier, when I'd turned to look at the Ghostgirls. I wouldn't have known. Nuts!

Believe me, I could feel that hardened cement on every inch of me. I remembered Bruce's beautiful picture of a universe without Big Change and decided it was about the worst idea going. I went on eating, though I wasn't so sure now it was a good idea to keep myself strong.

"Does the Maintainer have an Introversion telltale? Siddy!"

"'Sdeath, chit, and you love me, speak lower. Of a sudden, I feel not well, as if I'd drunk a butt of Rhenish and slept inside it. Marry yes, blue. In short flashes, saith the manual. Why ask'st thou?"

"No reason. God, Siddy, what I'd give for a breath of Change Wind."

"Thou can'st say that eftsoons," he groaned. I must have looked pretty miserable myself, for he put his arm around my shoulders and whispered gruffly, "Comfort thyself, sweetling, that while we suffer thus sorely, we yet cannot die the Change Death."

"What's that?" I asked him.

I didn't want to bounce around like the others. I had a suspicion I'd carry it too far. So, to keep myself from going batty, I started to rework the business of who had done what to the Maintainer.

During the hunt, there had been some pretty wild suggestions tossed around as to its disappearance or at least its Introversion: a feat of Snake science amounting to sorcery; the Spider high command bunkering the Places from above, perhaps in reaction to the loss of the Express Room, in such a hurry that they hadn't even time to transmit warnings; the hand of the Late Cosmicians, those mysterious hypothetical beings who are supposed to have successfully resisted the extension of the Change War into the future much beyond Sevensee's epoch — unless the Late Cosmicians are the ones fighting the Change War.

One thing these suggestions had steered very clear of was naming any one of us as a suspect, whether acting as Snake spy, Spider political police, agent of — who knows, after Bruce? — a secret Change World Committee of Public Safety or Spider revolutionary underground, or strictly on our own. Just as no one had piped a word,

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since the Maintainer had been palmed, about the split between Erich's and Bruce's factions.

Good group thinking probably, to sink differences in the emergency, but that didn't apply to what I did with my own thoughts.

WHO wanted to escape so bad they'd Introvert the Place, cutting off all possible contact and communication either way with the cosmos and running the very big risk of not getting back to the cosmos at all?

Leaving out what had happened since Bruce had arrived and stirred things up, Doc seemed to me to have the strongest motive. He knew that Sid couldn't keep covering up for him forever and that Spider punishments for derelictions of duty are not just the clink of a firing squad, as Erich had reminded us. But Doc had been flat on the floor in front of the bar from the time Bruce had jumped on top of it, though I certainly hadn't had my eye on him every second.

Beau? Beau had said he was bored with the Place at a time when what he said counted, so he'd hardly lock himself in it maybe forever, not to mention locking Bruce in with himself and the babe he had a yen for.

Sid loves reality, Changing or not, and every least thing in it, people especially, more than any man or woman I've ever known — he's like a big-eyed baby who wants to grab every object and put it in his mouth — and it was hard to imagine him ever cutting himself off from the cosmos.

Maud, Kaby, Mark and the two ETs? None of them had any motive I knew of, though Seensee's being from the very far future did tie in with that idea about the Late Cosmicians, and there did seem to be something developing between the Cretan and the Roman that could make them want to be Introverted together.

"Stick to the facts, Greta," I reminded myself with a private groan.

That left Erich, Bruce, Lili and myself.

Erich, I thought — now we're getting somewhere. The little commandant has the nervous system of a coyote and the courage of a crazy tomcat, and if he thought it would help him settle his battle with Bruce better to be locked in with him, he'd do it in a second.

But even before Erich had danced on the bomb, he'd been heckling Bruce from the crowd. Still, there would have been time between heckles for him to step quietly back from us, Introvert the Maintainer and . . . well, that was nine-tenths of the problem.

If I was the guilty party, I was nuts and that was the best explanation of all. Gr-r-r!

Bruce's motives seemed so ob-

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vious, especially the mortal (or was it immortal?) danger he'd put himself in by inciting mutiny, that it seemed a shame he'd been in full view on the bar so long. Surely, if the Maintainer had been Introverted before he jumped on the bar, we'd all have noticed the flashing blue telltale. For that matter, I'd have noticed it when I looked back at the Ghostgirls—if it worked as Sid claimed, and he said he had never seen it in operation, just read in the manual — oh, 'sdeath!

BUT Bruce didn't need opportunity, as I'm sure all the males in the Place would have told me right off, because he had Lili to pull the job for him and she had as much opportunity as any of the rest of us. Myself, I have large reservations to this woman-putty - in - the - hands - of - the - man-she-loves-madly theory, but I had to admit there was something to be said for it in this case, and it had seemed quite natural to me when the rest of us had decided, by unspoken agreement, that neither Lili's nor Bruce's checks counted when we were hunting for the Maintainer.

That took care of all of us and left only the mysterious stranger, intruding somehow through a Door (how'd he get it without using our Maintainer?) or from an unimaginable hiding place or straight out of the Void itself. I know that last is impossible — nothing can step out of nothing — but if anything ever looked like it was specially built for something not at all nice to come looming out of, it's the Void — misty, foggily churning, slimy gray . . .

"Wait a second," I told myself, "and hang onto this, Greta. It should have smacked you in the face at the start."

Whatever came out of the Void, or, more to the point, whoever slipped back from our crowd to the Maintainer, Bruce would have seen them. He was looking at the Maintainer past our heads the whole time, and whatever happened to it, he saw it.

Erich wouldn't have, even after he was on the bomb, because he'd been stagewise enough to face Bruce most of the time to build up his role as tribune of the people.

But Bruce would have — unless he got so caught up in what he was saying . . .

No, kid, a Demon is always an actor, no matter how much he believes in what he's saying, and there never was an actor yet who wouldn't instantly notice a member of the audience starting to walk out on his big scene.

So Bruce knew, which made him a better actor than I'd have been willing to grant, since it didn't look as if anyone else had thought of what had just occurred to me,

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or they'd have gone over and put it to him.

Not me, though — I don't work that way. Besides, I didn't feel up to it — Nervy Anna enfold me, I felt like pure hell.

"Maybe," I told myself encouragingly, "the Place is Hell," but added, "Be your age, Greta — be a real rootless, ruleless, ruthless twenty-nine."

CHAPTER 11

The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of gray, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists

— Sassoon

THE WESTERN FRONT, 1917

"PLEASE don't, Lili."

"I shall, my love."

"Sweetling, wake up! Hast the shakes?"

I opened my eyes a little and lied to Siddy with a smile and locked my hands together tight and watched Bruce and Lili quarrel nobly near the control divan and wished I had a great love to blur my misery and provide me with a passable substitute for Change Winds.

Lili won the argument, judging from the way she threw her head back and stepped away from Bruce's arms while giving him a proud, tender smile. He walked off a few steps; praise be, he didn't shrug his shoulders at us like an old husband, though his nerves were showing and he didn't seem to be standing Introversion well at all, as who of us were?

Lili rested a hand on the head of the control divan and pressed her lips together and looked around at us, mostly with her eyes. She'd wound a gray silk bandeau around her bangs. Her short gray silk dress without a waistline made her look, not so much like a flapper, though she looked like that all right, as like a little girl, except the neckline was scooped low enough to show she wasn't.

Her gaze hesitated and then stopped at me and I got a sunk feeling of what was coming, because women are always picking on me for an audience. Besides, Sid and I were the centrist party of two in our fresh-out-of-the-shell Place politics.

She took a deep breath and stuck out her chin and said in a voice that was even a little higher and Britisher than she usually uses, "We girls have often cried, 'Shut the Door!' But now the Door

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is jolly well shut for keeps!"

I knew I'd guessed right and I felt crawly with embarrassment, because I know about this love business of thinking you're the other person and trying to live their life — and grab their glory, though you don't know that — and carry their message for them, and how it can foul things up. Still, I couldn't help admitting what she said wasn't too bad a start — unpleasantly apt to be true, at any rate.

"My fiance believes we may yet be able to open the Door. I do not. He thinks it is a bit premature to discuss the peculiar pickle in which we all find ourselves. I do not."

There was a rasp of laughter from the bar. The militarists were reacting. Erich stepped out, looking very happy. "So now we have to listen to women making speeches," he called. "What is this Place, anyhow? Sidney Lessingham's Saturday Evening Sewing Circle?"

BEAU and Sevensee, who'd stopped their pacing halfway between the bar and the control divan, turned toward Erich, and Sevensee looked a little burlier, a little more like half a horse, than satyrs in mythology book illustrations. He stamped — medium hard, I'd say — and said, "Ahh, go flya kite." I'd found out he'd learned English from a Demon who'd been a longshoreman with syndicalist-anarchist sympathies. Erich shut up for a moment and stood there grinning, his hands on his hips.

Lili nodded to the satyr and cleared her throat, looking scared. But she didn't speak; I could see she was thinking and feeling something, and her face got ugly and haggard, as if she were in a Change Wind that hadn't reached me yet, and her mouth went into a snarl to fight tears, but some spurted out, and when she did speak her voice was an octave lower and it wasn't just London talking but New York too.

"I don't know how Resurrection felt to you people, because I'm new and I loathe asking questions, but to me it was pure torture and I wished only I'd had the courage to tell Suzaku, 'I wish to remain a Zombie, if you don't mind. I'd rather the nightmares.' But I accepted Resurrection because I've been taught to be polite and because there is the Demon in me I don't understand that always wishes to live, and I found that I still felt like a Zombie, although I could flit about, and that I still had the nightmares, except they'd grown a deal vivider.

"I was a young girl again, seventeen, and I suppose every woman wishes to be seventeen, but I wasn't seventeen inside my head — I was

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a woman who had died of Bright's disease in New York in 1929 and also, because a Big Change blew my lifeline into a new drift, a woman who had died of the same disease in Nazi-occupied London in 1955, but rather more slowly because, as you can fancy, the liquor was in far shorter supply. I had to live with both those sets of memories and the Change World didn't blot them out any more than I'm told it does those of any Demon, and it didn't even push them into the background as I'd hoped it would.

"When some Change Fellow would say to me, 'Hallo, beautiful, how about a smile?' or 'That's a posh frock, kiddo,' I'd be back at Bellevue looking down at my swollen figure and the light getting like spokes of ice, or in that dreadful gin-steeped Stepney bedroom with Phyllis coughing herself to death beside me, or at best, for a moment, a little girl in Glamorgan looking at the Roman road and wondering about the wonderful life that lay ahead."

I LOOKED at Erich, remembering he had a long nasty future back in the cosmos himself, and at any rate he wasn't smiling, and I thought maybe he's getting a little humility, knowing someone else has two of those futures, but I doubted it.

"Because, you see," Lili kept forcing it out, "all my three lives I'd been a girl who fell in love with a great young poet she'd never met, the voice of the new youth and all youth, and she'd told her first big lie to get in the Red Cross and across to France to be nearer him, and it was all danger and dark magics and a knight in armor, and she pictured how she'd find him wounded but not seriously, with a little bandage around his head, and she'd light a fag for him and smile lightly, never letting him guess what she felt, but only being her best self and watching to see if that made something happen to him . . .

"And then the Boche machine guns cut him down at Passchendaele and there couldn't ever have been bandages big enough and the girl stayed seventeen inside and messed about and tried to be wicked, though she wasn't very good at that, and to drink, and she had a bit more talent there, though drinking yourself to death is not nearly as easy as it sounds, even with a kidney weakness to help. But she turned the trick.

"Then a cock crows. She wakes with a tearing start from the gray dreams of death that fill her lifeline. It's cold daybreak. There's the smell of a French farm. She feels her ankles and they're not at all like huge rubber boots filled with water. They're not swollen the least bit. They're young legs.

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"There's a little window and the tops of a row of trees that may be poplars when there's more light, and what there is shows cots like her own and heads under blankets, and hanging uniforms make large shadows and a girl is snoring. There's a very distant rumble and it moves the window a bit. Then she remembers they're Red Cross girls many, many kilometers from Passchendaele and that Bruce Marchant is going to die at dawn today.

"In a few more minutes, he's going over the top where there's a crop-headed machine-gunner in field gray already looking down the sights and swinging the gun a bit. But she isn't going to die today. She's going to die in 1929 and 1955.

"And just as she's going mad, there's a creaking and out of the shadows tiptoes a Jap with a woman's hairdo and the whitest face and the blackest eyebrows. He's wearing a rose robe and a black sash which belts to his sides two samurai swords, but in his right hand he has a strange silver pistol. And he smiles at her as if they were brother and sister and lovers at the same time and he says, *'Voulez-vous vivre, mademoiselle?'* and she stares and he bobs his

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head and says, 'Missy wish live, yes, no?'"

SID'S paw closed quietly around my shaking hands. It always gets me to hear about anyone's Resurrection, and although mine was crazier, it also had the Krauts in it. I hoped she wouldn't go through the rest of the formula and she didn't.

"Five minutes later, he's gone down a stairs more like a ladder to wait below and she's dressing in a rush. Her clothes resist a little, as if they were lightly gummed to the hook and the stained wall, and she hates to touch them. It's getting lighter and her cot looks as if someone were still sleeping there, although it's empty, and she couldn't bring herself to put her hand on the place if her new life depended on it.

"She climbs down and her long skirt doesn't bother her because she knows how to swing it. Suzaku conducts her past a sentry who doesn't see them and a puffy-faced farmer in a smock coughing and spitting the night out of his throat. They cross the farmyard and it's filled with rose light and she sees the sun is up and she knows that Bruce Marchant has just bled to death.

"There's an empty open touring car chugging loudly, waiting for someone; it has huge muddy wheels with wooden spokes and a brass radiator that says 'Simplex.' But Suzaku leads her past it to a dunghill and bows apologetically and she steps through a Door."

I heard Erich say to the others at the bar, "How touching! Now shall I tell everyone about my operation?" But he didn't get much of a laugh.

"That's how Lilian Foster came into the Change World with its steel-engraved nightmares and its deadly pace and deadlier lassitudes. I was more alive than I ever had been before, but it was the kind of life a corpse might get from unending electrical shocks and I couldn't summon any purpose or hope and Bruce Marchant seemed farther away than ever.

"Then, not six hours ago, a Soldier in a black uniform came through the Door and I thought, 'It can't be, but it does look like his photographs,' and then I thought I heard someone say the name Bruce, and then he shouted as if to all the world that he was Bruce Marchant, and I knew there was a Resurrection beyond Resurrection, a true resurrection. Oh, Bruce—"

She looked at him and he was crying and smiling and all the young beauty flooded back into her face, and I thought, "It has to be Change Winds, but it can't be. Face it without slobbering, Greta—there's something that works bigger miracles than Change."

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And she went on, "And then the Change Winds died when the Snakes vaporized the Maintainer or the Ghostgirls Introverted it and all three of them vanished so swiftly and silently that even Bruce didn't notice — those are the best explanations I can summon and I fancy one of them is true. At all events, the Change Winds died and my past and even my futures became something I could bear lightly, because I have someone to bear them with me, and because at last I have a true future stretching out ahead of me, an unknown future which I shall create by living. Oh, don't you see that all of us have it now, this big opportunity?"

"*Hussa* for Sidney's suffragettes and the W.C.T.U.!" Erich cheered. "Beau, will you play us a medley of 'Hearts and Flowers' and 'Onward, Christian Soldiers'? I'm deeply moved, Lili. Where do the rest of us queue up for the Great Love Affair of the Century?"

CHAPTER 12

Now is a bearable burden. What buckles the back is the added weight of the past's mistakes and the future's fears.

I had to learn to close the front door to tomorrow and the back door to yesterday and settle down to here and now.

— Anonymous

A BIG OPPORTUNITY

NOBODY laughed at Erich's screwball sarcasms and still I thought, "Yes, perish his hysterical little gray head, but he's half right — Lili's got the big thing now and she wants to serve it up to the rest of us on a platter, only love doesn't cook and cut that way."

Those weren't bad ideas she had about the Maintainer, though, especially the one about the Ghostgirls doing the Introverting — it would explain why there couldn't be Introversion drill, the manual stuff about blue flashes being window-dressing, and something disappearing without movement or transition is the sort of thing that might not catch the attention — and I guess they gave the others something to think about too, for there wasn't any follow-up to Erich's frantic sniping.

But I honestly didn't see where there was this big opportunity being stuck away in a gray sack in the Void and I began to wonder and I got the strangest feeling and I said to myself, "Hang onto your hat, Greta. It's hope."

"The dreadful thing about being a Demon is that you have all time to range through," Lili was saying with a smile. "You can never shut the back door to yesterday or the front door to tomorrow and simply live in the present.

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But now that's been done for us: the Door is shut, we need never again rehash the past or the future. The Spiders and Snakes can never find us, for who ever heard of a Place that was truly lost being rescued? And as those in the know have told me, Introversion is the end as far as those outside are concerned. So we're safe from the Spiders and Snakes, we need never be slaves or enemies again, and we have a Place in which to live our new lives, the Place prepared for us from the beginning."

She paused. "Surely you understand what I mean? Sidney and Beauregard and Dr. Pyeshkov are the ones who explained it to me. The Place is a balanced aquarium, just like the cosmos. No one knows how many ages of Big Time it has been in use, without a bit of new material being brought in — only luxuries and people — and not a bit of waste cast off. No one knows how many more ages it may not sustain life. I never heard of Minor Maintainers wearing out. We have all the future, all the security, anyone can hope for. We have a Place to live together."

YOU know, she was dead right and I realized that all the time I'd had the conviction in the back of my mind that we were going to suffocate or something if we didn't get a Door open pretty quick. I should have known differently, if anybody should, because I'd once been in the Place without a Door for as long as a hundred sleeps during a foxhole stretch of the Change War and we'd had to start cycling our food and it had been okay.

And then, because it is also the way my mind works, I started to picture in a flash the consequences of our living together all by ourselves like Lili said.

I began to pair people off; I couldn't help it. Let's see, four women, six men, two ETs.

"Greta," I said, "you're going to be Miss Polly Andry for sure. We'll have a daily newspaper and folk-dancing classes, we'll shut the bar except evenings, Bruce'll keep a rhymed history of the Place."

I even thought, though I knew this part was strictly silly, about schools and children. I wondered what Siddy's would look like, or my little commandant's. "Don't go near the Void, dears." Of course that would be specially hard on the two ETs, but Sevensee at least wasn't so different and the genetics boys had made some wonderful advances and Maud ought to know about them and there were some amazing gadgets in Surgery when Doc sobered up. The patter of little hoofs . . .

"My fiance spoke to you about carrying a peace message to the rest of the cosmos," Lili added, "and bringing an end to the Big

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Change, and healing all the wounds that have been made in the Little Time."

I looked at Bruce. His face was set and strained, as will happen to the best of them when a girl starts talking about her man's business, and I don't know why, but I said to myself, "She's crucifying him, she's nailing him to his purpose as a woman will, even when there's not much point to it, as now."

And Lili went on, "It was a wonderful thought, but now we cannot carry or send any message and I believe it is too late in any event for a peace message to do any good. The cosmos is too raveled by change, too far gone. It will dissolve, fade, 'leave not a rack behind.' We're the survivors. The torch of existence has been put in our hands.

"We may already be all that's left in the cosmos, for have you thought that the Change Winds may have died at their source? We may never reach another cosmos, we may drift forever in the Void, but who of us has been Introverted before and who knows what we can or cannot do? We're a seed for a new future to grow from. Perhaps all doomed universes cast off seeds like this Place. It's a seed, it's an embryo, let it grow."

She looked swiftly at Bruce and then at Sid and she quoted, "'Come, my friends, 'tis not too late to seek a newer world'."

I SQUEEZED Sid's hand and I started to say something to him, but he didn't know I was there; he was listening to Lili quote Tennyson with his eyes entranced and his mouth open, as if he were imagining new things to put into it — oh, Siddy!

And then I saw the others were looking at her the same way. Ilhili-his was seeing finer feather forests than long-dead Luna's grow. The greenhouse child Maud ap-Ares Davies was stowing away on a starship bound for another galaxy, or thinking how different her life might have been, the children she might have had, if she'd stayed on the planets and out of the Change World. Even Erich looked as though he might be blitzing new universes, and Mark subduing them, for an eight-legged *Führer-imperator*. Beau was throbbing up a wider Mississippi in a bigger-than-life sidewheeler.

Even I — well, I wasn't dreaming of a Greater Chicago. "Let's not go hog-wild on this sort of thing," I told myself, but I did look up at the Void and I got a shiver because I imagined it drawing away and the whole Place starting to grow.

"I truly meant what I said about a seed," Lili went on slowly. "I know, as you all do, that there are no children in the Change World, that there cannot be, that we all become instantly sterile, that what

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they call a curse is lifted from us girls and we are no longer in bondage to the moon."

She was right, all right — if there's one thing that's been proved a million times in the Change World, it's that.

"But we are no longer in the Change World," Lili said softly, "and its limitations should no longer apply to us, including that one. I feel deeply certain of it, but—" she looked around slowly— "we are four women here and I thought one of us might have a surer indication."

My eyes followed hers around like anybody's would. In fact, everybody was looking around except Maud, and she had the silliest look of surprise on her face and it stayed there, and then, very carefully, she got down from the bar stool with her knitting. She looked at the half-finished pink bra with the long white needles stuck in it and her eyes bugged bigger yet, as if she were expecting it to turn into a baby sweater right then and there. Then she walked across the Place to Lili and stood beside her. While she was walking, the look of surprise changed to a quiet smile. The only other thing she did was throw her shoulders back a little.

I was jealous of her for a second, but it was a double miracle for her, considering her age, and I couldn't grudge her that. And to tell the truth, I was a little frightened, too. Even with Dave, I'd been bothered about this business of having babies.

YET I stood up with Siddy — I couldn't stop myself and I guess he couldn't either — and hand in hand we walked to the control divan. Beau and Sevensee were there and Bruce, of course, and then, so help me, those Soldiers to the death, Kaby and Mark, started over from the bar and I couldn't see anything in their eyes about the greater glory of Crete and Rome, but something, I think, about each other, and after a moment Illy slowly detached himself from the piano and followed, lightly trailing his tentacles on the floor.

I couldn't exactly see him hoping for little Illies in this company, unless it was true what the jokes said about Lunans, but maybe he was being really disinterested and maybe he wasn't; maybe he was simply figuring that Illy ought to be on the side with the biggest battalions.

I heard dragging footsteps behind us and here came Doc from the Gallery, carrying in his folded arms an abstract sculpture as big as a newborn baby. It was an agglomeration of perfect shiny gray spheres the size of golfballs, shaping up to something like a large brain, but with holes showing

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through here and there. He held it out to us like an infant to be admired and worked his lips and tongue as if he were trying very hard to say something, though not a word came out that you could understand, and I thought, "Maxey Aleksevich may be speechless drunk and have all sorts of holes in his head, but he's got the right instincts, bless his soulful little Russian heart."

We were all crowded around the control divan like a football team huddling. The Peace Packers, it came to me. Sevensee would be fullback or center and Illy left end — what a receiver! The right number, too. Erich was alone at the bar, but now even he—"Oh, no, this can't be," I thought—even he came toward us. Then I saw that his face was working the worst ever. He stopped halfway and managed to force a smile, but it was the worst, too. "That's my little commandant," I thought, "no team spirit."

"So now Lili and Bruce — yes, and *Grossmutterchen* Maud—have their little nest," he said, and he wouldn't have had to push his voice very hard to get a screech. "But what are the rest of us supposed to be — cowbirds?"

HE crooked his neck and flapped his hands and croaked, "Cuc-koo! Cuc-koo!" And I said to myself, "I often thought you were crazy, boy, but now I know."

"*Teufelsdreck!* — yes, Devil's dirt! — but you all seem to be infected with this dream of children. Can't you see that the Change World is the natural and proper end of evolution?—a period of enjoyment and measuring, an ultimate working out of things, which women call destruction — 'Help, I'm being raped!' 'Oh, what are they doing to my children?'— but which men know as fulfillment.

"You're given good parts in *Götterdämmerung* and you go up to the author and tap him on the shoulder and say, 'Excuse me, Herr Wagner, but this Twilight of the Gods is just a bit morbid. Why don't you write an opera for me about the little ones, the dear little blue-eyed curly-tops? A plot? Oh, boy meets girl and they settle down to breed, something like that.'

"Devil's dirt doubled and damned! Have you thought what life will be like without a Door to go out of to find freedom and adventure, to measure your courage and keenness? Do you want to grow long gray beards hobbling around this asteroid turned inside out? Putter around indoors to the end of your days, mooning about little baby cosmoses? — incidentally, with a live bomb for company. The cave, the womb, the little gray home in the nest — is that what you want? It'll grow? Oh, yes, like the city engulfing the wild wood, a

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proliferation of *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* — I should live so long!

"Women! — how I hate their bright eyes as they look at me from the fireside, bent-shouldered, rocking, deeply happy to be old, and say, 'He's getting weak, he's giving out, soon I'll have to put him to bed and do the simplest things for him.' Your filthy Triple Goddess, Kaby, the birther, bride, and burier of man! Woman, the enfeebler, the fetterer, the crippler! Woman! — and the curly-headed little cancers she wants!"

He lurched toward us, pointing at Lili. "I never knew one who didn't want to cripple a man if you gave her the chance. Cripple him, swaddle him, clip his wings, grind him to sausage to mold another man, hers, a doll man. You hid the Maintainer, you little smother-hen, so you could have your nest and your Brucie!"

He stopped, gasping, and I expected someone to bop him one on the schnozzle, and I think he did, too. I turned to Bruce and he was looking, I don't know how, sorry, guilty, anxious, angry, shaken, inspired, all at once, and I wished people sometimes had simple suburban reactions like magazine stories.

Then Erich made the mistake, if it was one, of turning toward Bruce and slowly staggering toward him, pawing the air with his hands as if he were going to collapse into his arms, and saying, "Don't let them get you, Bruce. Don't let them tie you down. Don't let them clip you — your words or your deeds. You're a Soldier. Even when you talked about a peace message, you talked about doing some smashing of your own. No matter what you think and feel, Bruce, no matter how much lying you do and how much you hide, you're really not on their side."

That did it.

IT didn't come soon enough or, I think, in the right spirit to please me, but I will say it for Bruce that he didn't muck it up by tipping or softening his punch. He took one step forward and his shoulders spun and his fist connected sweet and clean.

As he did it, he said only one word, "Loki!" and darn if that didn't switch me back to a campfire in the Indiana Dunes and my mother telling me out of the Elder Saga about the malicious, sneering, all-spoiling Norse god and how, when the other gods came to trap him in his hideaway by the river, he was on the point of finishing knotting a mysterious net big enough, I had imagined, to snare the whole universe, and that if they'd come a minute later, he would have.

Erich was stretched on the floor, his head hitched up, rubbing his

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jaw and glaring at Bruce. Mark, who was standing beside me, moved a little and I thought he was going to do something, maybe even clobber Bruce in the old spirit of you can't do that to my buddy, but he just shook his head and said, *"Omnia vincit amor."* I nudged him and said, "Meaning?" and he said, "Love licks everything."

I'd never have expected it from a Roman, but he was half right at any rate. Lili had her victory: Bruce clearing the field for the marriage by laying out the woman-hating boy friend who would be trying to get him to go out nights. At that moment, I think Bruce wanted Lili and a life with her more than he wanted to reform the Change World. Sure, us women have our little victories — until the legions come or the Little Corporal draws up his artillery or the Panzers roar down the road.

Erich scrambled to his feet and stood there in a half-slump, half-crouch, still rubbing his jaw and glaring at Bruce over his hand, but making no move to continue the fight, and I studied his face and said to myself, "If he can get a gun, he's going to shoot himself, I know."

Bruce started to say something and hesitated, like I would have in his shoes, and just then Doc got one of his unpredictable inspirations and went weaving out toward Erich, holding out the sculpture and making deaf-and-dumb noises like he had to us. Erich looked at him as if he were going to kill him, and then grabbed the sculpture and swung it up over his head and smashed it down on the floor, and for a wonder, it didn't shatter. It just skidded along in one piece and stopped inches from my feet.

That thing not breaking must have been the last straw for Erich. I swear I could see the red surge up through his eyes toward his brain. He swung around into the Stores sector and ran the few steps between him and the bronze bomb chest.

Everything got very slow motion for me, though I didn't do any moving. Almost every man started out after Erich. Bruce didn't, though, and Siddy turned back after the first surge forward, while Illy squunched down for a leap, and it was between Sevensee's hairy shanks and Beau's scissoring white pants that I saw that under-the-microscope circle of death's heads and watched Erich's finger go down on them in the order Kaby had given: one, three, five, six, two, four, seven. I was able to pray seven distinct times that he'd make a mistake.

He straightened up. Illy landed by the box like a huge silver spider and his tentacles whipped futilely across its top. The others surged

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to a frightened halt around them.

Erich's chest was heaving, but his voice was cool and collected as he said, "You mentioned something about our having a future, Miss Foster. Now you can make that more specific. Unless we get back to the cosmos and dump this box, or find a Spider A-tech, or manage to call headquarters for guidance on disarming the bomb, we have a future exactly thirty minutes long."

CHAPTER 13

But whence he was, or of what wombe ybore,
Of beasts, or of the earth, I have not red:
But certes was with milke of wolves and tygres fed.

— Spenser

THE TIGER IS LOOSE

I GUESS when they really push the button or throw the switch or spring the trap or focus the beam or what have you, you don't faint or go crazy or anything else convenient. I didn't. Everything, everybody, every move that was made, every word that was spoken, was painfully real to me, like a hand twisting and squeezing things deep inside me, and I saw every least detail spotlighted and magnified like I had the seven skulls.

Erich was standing beyond the bomb chest; little smiles were ruffling his lips. I'd never seen him look so sharp. Illy was beside him, but not on his side, you understand. Mark, Sevensee and Beau were around the chest to the nearer side. Beau had dropped to a knee and was scanning the chest minutely, terror-under-control making him bend his head a little closer than he needed to for clear vision, but with his hands locked together behind his back, I guess to restrain the impulse to push any and everything that looked like a disarming button.

Doc was sprawled face down on the nearest couch, out like a light, I suppose.

Us four girls were still by the control divan. With Kaby, that surprised me, because she didn't look scared or frozen, but almost as intensely alive as Erich.

Sid had turned back, as I'd said, and had one hand stretched out toward but not touching the Minor Maintainer, and a look on his beardy face as if he were calling down death and destruction on every boozy rogue who had ever gone up from King's Lynn to Cambridge and London, and I realized why: if he'd thought of the Minor Maintainer a second sooner, he could have pinned Erich down with heavy gravity before he could touch the buttons.

Bruce was resting one hand on the head of the control divan and

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was looking toward the group around the chest, toward Erich, I think, as if Erich had done something rather wonderful for him, though I can't imagine myself being tickled at being included in anybody's suicide surprise party. Bruce looked altogether too dreamy, Brahma blast him, for someone who must have the same steel-spiked thought in his head that I know darn well the rest of us had: that in twenty-nine minutes or so, the Place would be a sun in a bag.

ERICH was the first to get down to business, as I'd have laid any odds he would be. He had the jump on us and he wasn't going to lose it.

"Well, when are you going to start getting Lili to tell u where she hid the Maintainer? It has to be her — she was too certain it was gone forever when she talked. And Bruce must have seen from the bar who took the Maintainer, and who would he cover up for but his girl?"

There he was plagiarizing my ideas, but I guess I was willing to sign them over to him in full if he got us the right pail of water for that time-bomb.

He glanced at his wrist. "According to my Caller, you have twenty-nine and a half minutes, including the time it will take to get a Door or contact headquarters. When are you going to get busy on the girl?"

Bruce laughed a little — deprecatingly, so help me — and started toward him. "Look here, old man," he said, "there's no need to trouble Lili, or to fuss with headquarters, even if you could. Really not at all. Not to mention that your surmises are quite unfounded, old chap, and I'm a bit surprised at your advancing them. But that's quite all right because, as it happens, I'm an atomics technician and I even worked on that very bomb. To disarm it, you just have to fiddle a bit with some of the ankhs, those hoopy little crosses. Here, let me—"

Allah il allah, but it must have struck everybody as it did me as being just too incredible an assertion, too bloody British a barefaced bluff, for Erich didn't have to say a word; Mark and Sevensee grabbed Bruce by the arms, one on each side, as he stooped toward the bronze chest, and they weren't gentle about it. Then Erich spoke.

"Oh, no, Bruce. Very sporting of you to try to cover up for your girl friend, but we aren't going to let ourselves be blown to stripped atoms twenty-eight minutes too soon while you monkey with the buttons, the very thing Benson-Carter warned against, and pray for a guesswork miracle. It's too thin, Bruce, when you come from 1917 and haven't been on the Big

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Time for a hundred sleeps and were calling for an A-tech yourself a few hours ago. Much too thin. Bruce, something is going to happen that I'm afraid you won't like, but you're going to have to put up with it. That is, unless Miss Foster decides to be cooperative."

"I say, you fellows, let me go," Bruce demanded, struggling experimentally. "I know it's a bit thick to swallow and I did give you the wrong impression calling for an A-tech, but I just wanted to capture your attention then; I didn't want to have to work on the bomb. Really, Erich, would they have ordered Benson-Carter to pick us up unless one of us were an A-tech? They'd be sure to include one in the bally operation."

"When they're using patchwork tactics?" Erich grinningly quoted back at him.

KABY spoke up beside me and said, "Benson-Carter was a magician of matter and he was going on the operation disguised as an old woman. We have the cloak and hood with the other garments," and I wondered how this cold fish of a she-officer could be the same girl who was giving Mark slurpy looks not ten minutes ago.

"Well?" Erich asked, glancing at his Caller and then swinging his eyes around at us as if there must be some of the old *Wehrmacht* iron somewhere. We all found ourselves looking at Lili and she was looking so sharp herself, so ready to jump and so at bay, that it was all *I* needed, at any rate, to make Erich's theory about the Maintainer a rock-bottom certainty.

Bruce must have realized the way our minds were working, for he started to struggle in earnest and at the same time called, "For God's sake, don't do anything to Lili! Let me loose, you idiots! Everything's true I told you — I can save you from that bomb. Sevensee, you took my side against the Spiders; you've nothing to lose. Sid, you're an Englishman. Beau, you're a gentleman and you love her, too — for God's sake, stop them!"

Beau glanced up over his shoulder at Bruce and the others surging around close to his ankles and he had on his poker face. Sid I could tell was once more going through the purgatory of decision. Beau reached his own decision first and I'll say it for him that he acted on it fast and intelligently. Right from his kneeling position and before he'd even turned his head quite back, he jumped Erich.

But other things in this cosmos besides Man can pick sides and act fast. Illy landed on Beau midway and whipped his tentacles around him tight and they went wobbling around like a drunken white-and-silver barber pole. Beau got his hands each around a ten-

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tacle, and at the same time his face began to get purple, and I winced at what they were both going through.

Maybe Sevensee had a hoof in Sid's purgatory, because Bruce shook loose from the satyr and tried to knock out Mark, but the Roman twisted his arm and kept him from getting in a good punch.

Erich didn't make a move to mix into either fight, which is my little commandant all over. Using his fists on anybody but me is beneath him.

THEN Sid made his choice, but there was no way for me to tell what it was, for, as he reached for the Minor Maintainer, Kaby contemptuously snatched it away from his hands and gave him a knee in the belly that doubled me up in sympathy and sent him sprawling on his knees toward the fighters. On the return, Kaby gave Lili, who'd started to grab too, an effortless backhand smash that set her down on the divan.

Erich's face lit up like an electric sign and he kept his eyes fixed on Kaby.

She crouched a little, carrying her weight on the balls of her feet and firmly cradling the Minor Maintainer in her left arm, like a basketball captain planning an offensive. Then she waved her free hand decisively to the right. I didn't get it, but Erich did and Mark too, for Erich jumped for the Refresher sector and Mark let go of Bruce and followed him, ducking around Sevensee's arms, who was coming back into the fight on which side I don't know. Illy unwhipped from Beau and copied Erich and Mark with one big spring.

Then Kaby twisted a dial as far as it would go and Bruce, Beau, Sevensee and poor Siddy were slammed down and pinned to the floor by about eight gravities.

It should have been lighter near us — I hoped it was, but you couldn't tell from watching Siddy; he went flat on his face, spread-eagled, one hand stretched toward me so close, I could have touched it (but not let go!), and his mouth was open against the floor and he was gasping through a corner of it and I could see his spine trying to sink through his belly. Bruce just managed to get his head and one shoulder up a bit, and they all made me think of a Dore illustration of the *Inferno* where the cream of the damned are frozen up to their necks in ice in the innermost circle of Hell.

The gravity didn't catch me, although I could feel it in my left arm. I was mostly in the Refresher sector, but I dropped down flat too, partly out of a crazy compassion I have, but mostly because I didn't want to take a chance of having Kaby knock me down.

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Erich, Mark and Illy had got clear and they headed toward us. Maud picked the moment to make her play; she hadn't much choice of times, if she wanted to make one. The Old Girl was looking it for once, but I guess the thought of her miracle must have survived alongside the fear of sacked sun and must have meant a lot to her, for she launched out fast, all set to straight-arm Kaby into the heavy gravity and grab the Minor Maintainer with the other hand.

CHAPTER 14

Like diamonds, we are cut with
our own dust. — Webster

"NOW WILL YOU TALK?"

CRETANS have eyes under their beak hair, or let's face it, Entertainers aren't Soldiers. Kaby weaved to one side and flicked a helpful hand and poor old Maud went where she'd been going to send Kaby. It sickened me to see the gravity take hold and yank her down.

I could have jumped up and made it four in a row for Kaby, but I'm not a bit brave when things like my life are at stake.

Lili was starting to get up, acting a little dazed. Kaby gently pushed her down again and quietly said, "Where is it?" and then hauled off and slapped her across the face. What got me was the matter-of-fact way Kaby did it. I can understand somebody getting mad and socking someone, or even deliberately working up a rage so as to be able to do something nasty, but this cold-blooded way turns my stomach.

Lili looked as if half her face were about to start bleeding, but she didn't look dazed any more and her jaw set. Kaby grabbed Lili's pearl necklace and twisted it around her neck and it broke and the pearls went bouncing around like ping-pong balls, so Kaby yanked down Lili's gray silk bandeau until it was around the neck and tightened that. Lili started to choke through her tight-pressed lips. Erich, Mark and Illy had come up and crowded around, but they seemed to be content with the job Kaby was doing.

"Listen, slut," she said, "we have no time. You have a healing room in this place. I can work the things."

"Here it comes," I thought, wishing I could faint. On top of everything, on top of death even, they had to drag in the nightmare personally stylized for me, the horror with my name on it. I wasn't going to be allowed to blow up peacefully. They weren't satisfied with an A-bomb. They had to write my private hell into the script.

"There is a thing called an Invertor," Kaby said exactly as I'd

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known she would, but as I didn't really hear it just then — a mental split I'll explain in a moment. "It opens you up so they can cure your insides without cutting your skin or making you bleed anywhere. It turns the big parts of you inside out, but not the blood tubes. All your skin — your eyes, ears, nose, toes, all of it — becoming the lining of a little hole that's half-filled with your hair.

"Meantime, your insides are exposed for whatever the healer wants to do to them. You live for a while on the air inside the hole. First the healer gives you an air that makes you sleep, or you go mad in about fifty heartbeats. We'll see what ten heartbeats do to you without the sleepy air. Now will you talk?"

I HADN'T been listening to her, though, not the real me, or I'd have gone mad without getting the treatment. I once heard Doc say your liver is more mysterious and farther away from you than the stars, because although you live with your liver all your life, you never see it or learn to point to it instinctively, and the thought of someone messing around with that intimate yet unknown part of you is just too awful.

I knew I had to do something quick. Hell, at the first hint of Introversion, before Kaby had even named it, Illy had winced so that his tentacles were all drawn up like fat feather-sausages. Erich had looked at him questioningly, but that lousy Looney had un-endeared himself to me by squeaking, "Don't mind me, I'm just sensitive. Get on with the girl. Make her tell."

Yes, I knew I had to do something, and here on the floor that meant thinking hard and in high gear about something else. The screwball sculpture Erich had tried to smash was a foot from my nose and I saw a faint trail of white stuff where it had skidded. I reached out and touched the trail; it was finely gritty, like powdered glass. I tipped up the sculpture and the part on which it had skidded wasn't marred at all, not even dulled; the gray spheres were as glisteningly bright as ever. So I knew the trail was diamond dust rubbed off the diamonds in the floor by something even harder.

That told me the sculpture was something special and maybe Doc had had a real idea in his pickled brain when he'd been pushing the thing at all of us and trying to tell us something. He hadn't managed to say anything then, but he had earlier when he'd been going to tell us what to do about the bomb, and maybe there was a connection.

I twisted my memory hard and let it spring back and I got "Inversh . . . bosh . . ." Bosh, indeed! Bosh and inverse bosh to all boozers, Russki or otherwise.

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So I quick tried the memory trick again and this time I got "glovsh" and then I grasped and almost sneezed on diamond dust as I watched the pieces fit themselves together in my mind like a speeded-up movie reel.

It all hung on that black right-hand hussar's glove Lili had produced for Bruce. Only she couldn't have found it in Stores, because we'd searched every fractional pigeonhole later on and there hadn't been any gloves there, not even the left-hand mate there would have been. Also, Bruce had had two left-hand gloves to start with, and we had been through the whole Place with a fine-tooth comb, and there had been only the two black gloves on the floor where Bruce had kicked them off the bar—those two and those two only, the left-hand glove he'd brought from outside and the right-hand glove Lili had produced for him.

So a left-hand glove had disappeared — the last I'd seen of it, Lili had been putting it on her tray —and a right-hand glove had appeared. Which could only add up to one thing: Lili had turned the left-hand glove into an identical right. She couldn't have done it by turning it inside out the ordinary way, because the lining was different.

But as I knew only too sickeningly well, there was an extraordinary way to turn things inside out, things like human beings. You merely had to put them on the Invertor in Surgery and flick the switch for full Inversion.

Or you could flick it for partial Inversion and turn something into a perfect three-dimensional mirror image of itself, just what a right-hand glove is of a left. Rotation through the fourth dimension, the science boys call it; I've heard of it being used in surgery on the highly asymmetric Martians, and even to give a socially impeccable right hand to a man who'd lost one, by turning an amputated right arm into an amputated left.

Ordinarily, nothing but live things are ever Inverted in Surgery and you wouldn't think of doing it to an inanimate object, especially in a Place where the Doc's a drunk and the Surgery hasn't been used for hundreds of sleeps.

But when you've just fallen in love, you think of wonderful crazy things to do for people. Drunk with love, Lili had taken Bruce's extra left-hand glove into Surgery, partially Inverted it, and got a right-hand glove to give him.

What Doc had been trying to say with his "Inversh . . . bosh . . ." was "Invert the box," meaning we should put the bronze chest through full Inversion to get at the bomb inside to disarm it. Doc too had got the idea from Lili's trick with the glove. What an inside-

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out tactical atomic bomb would look like, I could not imagine and did not particularly care to see. I might have to, though, I realized.

But the fast-motion film was still running in my head. Later on, Lili had decided like I had that her lover was going to lose out in his plea for mutiny unless she could give him a really captive audience—and maybe, even then, she had been figuring on creating the nest for Bruce's chicks and . . . all those other things we'd believed in for a while. So she'd taken the Major Maintainer and remembered the glove, and not many seconds later, she had set down on a shelf of the Art Gallery an object that no one would think of questioning—except someone who knew the Gallery by heart.

I LOOKED at the abstract sculpture a foot from my nose, at the clustered gray spheres the size of golfballs. I had known that the inside of the Maintainer was made up of vastly tough, vastly hard giant molecules, but I hadn't realized they were quite *that* big.

I said to myself, "Greta, this is going to give you a major psychosis, but you're the one who has to do it, because no one is going to listen to your deductions when they're all practically living on negative time already."

I got up as quietly as if I were getting out of a bed I shouldn't have been in — there are some things Entertainers are good at — and Kaby was just saying "you go mad in about fifty heartbeats." Everybody on their feet was looking at Lili. Sid seemed to have moved, but I had no time for him except to hope he hadn't done anything that might attract attention to me.

I stepped out of my shoes and walked rapidly to Surgery—there's one good thing about this hardest floor anywhere, it doesn't creak. I walked through the Surgery screen that is like a wall of opaque, odorless cigarette smoke and I concentrated on remembering my snafued nurse's training, and before I had time to panic, I had the sculpture positioned on the gleaming table of the Invertor.

I froze for a moment when I reached for the Inversion switch, thinking of the other time and trying to remember what it had been that bothered me so much about an inside-out brain being bigger and not having eyes, but then I either thumbed my nose at my nightmare or kissed my sanity good-by, I don't know which, and twisted the switch all the way over, and there was the Major Maintainer winking blue about three times a second as nice as you could want it.

It must have been working as sweet and steady as ever, all the time it was Inverted, except that,

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being inside out, it had hocused the direction finders.

CHAPTER 15

black legged spiders
with red hearts of hell

—marquis

LORD SPIDER

"JESU!" I turned and Sid's face was sticking through the screen like a tinted bas-relief hanging on a gray wall and I got the impression he had peered unexpectedly through a slit in an arras into Queen Elizabeth's bedroom.

He didn't have any time to linger on the sensation, even if he'd wanted to, for an elbow with a copper band thrust through the screen and dug his ribs and Kaby marched Lili in by the neck. Erich, Mark and Illy were right behind. They caught the blue flashes and stopped dead, staring at the long-lost. Erich spared me one look which seemed to say, so you did it, not that it matters. Then he stepped forward and picked it up and held it solidly to his left side in the double right-angle made by fingers, forearm and chest, and reached for the Introversion switch with a look on his face as if he were opening a fifth of whisky.

The blue light died and Change Winds hit me like a stiff drink that had been a long, long time in coming, like a hot trumpet note out of nowhere.

I felt the changing pasts blowing through me, and the uncertainties whistling past, and ice-stiff reality softening with all its duties and necessities, and the little memories shredding away and dancing off like autumn leaves, leaving maybe not even ghosts behind, and all the crazy moods like Mardi Gras dancers pouring down an evening street, and something inside me had the nerve to say it didn't care whether Greta Forzane's death was riding in those Winds because they felt so good.

I could tell it was hitting the others the same way. Even battered, tight-lipped Lili seemed to be saying, you're making me drink the stuff and I hate you for it, but I do love it. I guess we'd all had the worry that even finding and Extroverting the Maintainer wouldn't put us back in touch with the cosmos and give us those Winds we hate and love.

The thing that cut through to us as we stood there glowing was not the thought of the bomb, though that would have come in a few seconds more, but Sid's voice. He was still standing in the screen, except that now his face was out the other side and we could just see parts of his gray-doubleted back, but, of course, his "Jesu!" came through the screen as if it weren't there.

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At first I couldn't figure out who he could be talking to, but I swear I never heard his voice so courtly obsequious before, so strong and yet so filled with awe and an under-note of, yes, sheer terror.

"Lord, I am filled from top to toe with confusion that you should so honor my poor Place," he said. "Poor say I and mine, when I mean that I have ever busked it faithfully for you, not dreaming that you would ever condescend... yet knowing that your eye was certes ever upon me . . . though I am but as a poor pinch of dust adrift between the suns . . . I abase myself. Prithee, how may I serve thee, sir? I know not e'en how most suitably to address thee, Lord . . . King . . . Emperor Spider!"

I FELT like I was getting very small, but not a bit less visible, worse luck, and even with the Change Winds inside me to give me courage, I thought this was really too much, coming on top of everything else; it was simply unfair.

At the same time, I realized it was to be expected that the big bosses would have been watching us with their unblinking beady black eyes ever since we had Introverted waiting to pounce if we should ever come out of it. I tried to picture what was on the other side of the screen and I didn't like the assignment.

But in spite of being petrified, I had a hard time not giggling, like the zany at graduation exercises, at the way the other ones in Surgery were taking it.

I mean the Soldiers. They each stiffened up like they had the old ramrod inside them, and their faces got that important look, and they glanced at each other and the floor without lowering their heads, as if they were measuring the distance between their feet and mentally chalking alternate sets of footprints to step into. The way Erich and Kaby held the Major and Minor Maintainers became formal; the way they checked their Callers and nodded reassuringly was positively esoteric. Even Illy somehow managed to look as if he were on parade.

Then from beyond the screen came what was, under the circumstances, the worst noise I've ever heard, a seemingly wordless distant-sounding howling and wailing, with a note of menace that made me shake, although it also had a nasty familiarity about it I couldn't place. Sid's voice broke into it, loud, fast and frightened.

"Your pardon, Lord, I did not think . . . certes, the gravity . . . I'll attend to it on the instant." He whipped a hand and half a head back through the screen, but without looking back and snapped his

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fingers, and before I could blink, Kaby had put the Minor Maintainer in his hand.

Sid went completely out of sight then and the howling stopped, and I thought that if that was the way a Lord Spider expressed his annoyance at being subjected to incorrect gravity, I hoped the bosses wouldn't start any conversations with me.

Erich pursed his lips and threw the other Soldiers a nod and the four of them marched through the screen as if they'd drilled a lifetime for this moment. I had the wild idea that Erich might give me his arm, but he strode past me as if I were . . . an Entertainer.

I hesitated a moment then, but I had to see what was happening outside, even if I got eaten up for it. Besides, I had a bit of the thought that if these formalities went on much longer, even a Lord Spider was going to discover just how immune he was to confined atomic blast.

I walked through the screen with Lili beside me.

THE Soldiers had stopped a few feet in front of it. I looked around ahead for whatever it was going to turn out to be, prepared to drop a curtsy or whatever else, bar nothing, that seemed expected of me.

I had a hard time spotting the beast. Some of the others seemed to be having trouble too. I saw Doc weaving around foolishly by the control divan, and Bruce and Beau and Sevensee and Maud on their feet beyond it, and I wondered whether we were dealing with an invisible monster; ought to be easy enough for the bosses to turn a simple trick like invisibility.

Then I looked sharply left where everyone else, even glassy-eyed Doc, was coming to look, into the Door sector, only there wasn't any monster there or even a Door, but just Siddy holding the Minor Maintainer and grinning like when he is threatening to tickle me, only more fiendishly.

"Not a move, masters," he cried, his eyes dancing, "or I'll pin the pack of you down, marry and amen I will. It is my firm purpose to see the Place blasted before I let this instrument out of my hands again."

My first thought was, "'Sblood but Siddy is a real actor! I don't care if he didn't study under anyone later than Burbage, that just proves how good Burbage is."

Sid had convinced us not only that the real Spiders had arrived, but earlier that the gravity in the edge of Stores had been a lot heavier than it actually was. He completely fooled all those Soldiers, including my swelled-headed victorious little commandant, and I kind of filed away the timing

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of that business of reaching out the hand and snapping the fingers without looking, it was so good.

"Beauregard!" Sid called. "Get to the Major Maintainer and call headquarters. But don't come through Door, marry go by Refresher. I'll not trust a single Demon of you in this sector with me until much more has been shown and settled."

"Siddy, you're wonderful," I said, starting toward him. "As soon as I got the Maintainer unsnarled and looked around and saw your sweet old face—"

"Back, tricksy trull! Not the breadth of one scarlet toenail nearer me, you Queen of Sleights and High Priestess of Deception!" he bellowed. "You least of all do I trust. Why you hid the Maintainer, I know not, 'faith, but later you'll discover the truth to me or I'll have your gizzard."

I could see there was going to have to be a little explaining.

DOC, touched off, I guess, by Sid waving his hand at me, threw back his head and let off one of those shuddery Siberian wolf-howls he does so blamed well. Sid waved toward him sharply and he shut up, beaming toothily, but at least I knew who was responsible for the Spider wail of displeasure that Sid had either called for or more likely got as a gift of the gods and used in his act.

Beau came circling around fast and Erich shoved the Major Maintainer into his hands without making any fuss. The four Soldiers were looking pretty glum after losing their grand review.

Beau dumped some junk off one of the Art Gallery's sturdy taborets and set the Major Maintainer on it carefully but fast, and quickly knelt in front of it and whipped on some earphones and started to tune. The way he did it snatched away from me my inward glory at my big Inversion brainwave so fast, I might never have had it, and there was nothing in my mind again but the bronze bomb chest.

I wondered if I should suggest Inverting the thing, but I said to myself, "Uh-uh, Greta, you got no diploma to show them and there probably isn't time to try two things, anyway."

Then Erich for once did something I wanted him to, though I didn't care for its effect on my nerves, by looking at his Caller and saying quietly, "Nine minutes to go, if Place time and cosmic time are synching."

Beau was steady as a rock and working adjustments so fine that I couldn't even see his fingers move.

Then, at the other end of the Place, Bruce took a few steps toward us. Sevensee and Maud followed a bit behind him. I remembered Bruce was another of

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our nuts with a private program for blowing up the place.

"Sidney," he called, and then, when he'd got Sid's attention, "Remember, Sidney, you and I both came down to London from Peterhouse."

I didn't get it. Then Bruce looked toward Erich with a devil-may-care challenge and toward Lili as if he were asking her forgiveness for something. I couldn't read her expression; the bruises were blue on her throat and her cheek was puffy.

Then Bruce once more shot Erich that look of challenge and he spun and grabbed Sevensee by a wrist and stuck out a foot — even half-horses aren't too sharp about infighting, I guess, and the satyr had every right to feel at least as confused as I felt — and sent him stumbling into Maud, and the two of them tumbled to the floor in a jumble of hairy legs and pearl-gray frock. Bruce raced to the bomb chest.

MOST of us yelled, "Stop him, Sid, pin him down," or something like that — I know I did because I was suddenly sure that he'd been asking Lili's pardon for blowing the two of them up — and all the rest of us too, the love-blinded stinker.

Sid had been watching him all the time and now he lifted his hand to the Minor Maintainer, but then he didn't touch any of the dials, just watched and waited, and I thought, "Shaitan shave us! Does Siddy want in on death, too? Ain't he satisfied with all he knows about life?"

Bruce had knelt and was twisting some things on the front of the chest, and it was all as bright as if he were under a bank of Klieg lights, and I was telling myself I wouldn't know anything when the fireball fired, and not believing it, and Sevensee and Maud had got unscrambled and were starting for Bruce, and the rest of us were yelling at Sid, except that Erich was just looking at Bruce very happily, and Sid was still not doing anything, and it was unbearable except just then I felt the little arteries start to burst in my brain like a string of firecrackers and the old aorta pop, and for good measure, a couple of valves come unhinged in my ticker, and I was thinking, "Well, now I know what it's like to die of heart failure and high blood pressure," and having a last quiet smile at having cheated the bomb, when Bruce jumped up and back from the chest.

"That does it!" he announced cheerily. "She's as safe as the Bank of England."

Sevensee and Maud stopped themselves just short of knocking him down and I said to myself, "Hey, let's get a move on! I

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thought heart attacks were fast."

Before anyone else could speak, Beau did. He had turned around from the Major Maintainer and pulled aside one of the earphones.

"I got headquarters," he said crisply. "They told me how to disarm the bomb — I merely said I thought we ought to know. What did you do, sir?" he called to Bruce.

"There's a row of four ankhs just below the lock. The first to your left you give a quarter turn to the right, the second a quarter turn to the left, same for the fourth, and you don't touch the third."

"That is it, sir," Beau confirmed.

The long silence was too much for me; I guess I must have the shortest span for unspoken relief going. I drew some nourishment out of my restored arteries into my brain cells and yelled, "Siddy, I know I'm a tricksy trull and the High Vixen of all Foxes, but what the Hell is Peterhouse?"

"The oldest college at Cambridge," he told me rather coolly.

CHAPTER 16

"Familiar with infinite universe sheafs and open-ended postulate systems? — the notion that everything is possible—and I mean everything — and everything has happened. *Everything.*"

—Heinlein

THE POSSIBILITY-BINDERS

AN hour later, I was nursing a weak highball and a black eye in the sleepy-time darkness on the couch farthest from the piano, half watching the highlighted party going on around it and the bar, while the Place waited for rendezvous with Egypt and the Battle of Alexandria.

Sid had swept all our outstanding problems into one big bundle and, since his hand held the joker of the Minor Maintainer, he had settled them all as high-handedly as if they'd been those of a bunch of schoolkids.

It amounted to this:

We'd been Introverted when most of the damning things had happened, so presumably only we knew about them, and we were all in so deep one way or another that we'd all have to keep quiet to protect our delicate complexions.

Well, Erich's triggering the bomb did balance rather neatly Bruce's incitement to mutiny, and there was Doc's drinking, while everybody who had declared for the peace message had something to hide. Mark and Kaby I felt inclined to trust anywhere, Maud for sure, and Erich in this particular matter, damn him. Illy I didn't feel at all easy about, but I told myself there always has to be a fly in the ointment — a darn

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big one this time, and furry.

Sid didn't mention his own dirty linen, but he knew we knew he'd flopped badly as boss of the Place and only recouped himself by that last-minute flimflam.

Remembering Sid's trick made me think for a moment about the real Spiders. Just before I snuck out of Surgery, I'd had a vivid picture of what they must look like, but now I couldn't get it again. It depressed me, not being able to remember — oh, I probably just imagined I'd had a picture, like a hophead on a secret-of-the-universe kick. Me ever find out anything about the Spiders?—except for nervous notions like I'd had during the recent fracas?—what a laugh!

The funniest thing (ha-ha!) was that I had ended up the least-trusted person. Sid wouldn't give me time to explain how I'd deduced what had happened to the Maintainer, and even when Lili spoke up and admitted hiding it, she acted so bored I don't think everybody believed her — although she did spill the realistic detail that she hadn't used partial Inversion on the glove; she'd just turned it inside out to make it a right and then done a full Inversion to get the lining back inside.

I TRIED to get Doc to confirm that he'd reasoned the thing out the same way I had, but he said he had been blacked out the whole time, except during the first part of the hunt, and he didn't remember having any bright ideas at all. Right now, he was having Maud explain to him twice, in detail, everything that had happened. I decided that it was going to take a little more work before my reputation as a great detective was established.

I looked over the edge of the couch and just made out in the gloom one of Bruce's black gloves. It must have been kicked there. I fished it up. It was the right-hand one. My big clue, and was I sick of it! Got mittens, God forbid! I slung it away and, like a lurking octopus, Illy shot up a tentacle from the next couch, where I hadn't known he was resting, and snatched the glove like it was a morsel of underwater garbage. These ETs can seem pretty shuddery non-human at times.

I thought of what a cold-blooded, skin-saving louse Illy had been, and about Sid and his easy suspicions, and Erich and my black eye, and how, as usual, I'd got left alone in the end. My men!

Bruce had explained about being an A-tech. Like a lot of us, he'd had several widely different jobs during his first weeks in the Change World and one of them had been as secretary to a group of the minor atomics boys from the Manhattan - Project - Earth - Satel-

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lite days. I gathered he'd also absorbed some of his bothersome ideas from them. I hadn't quite decided yet what species of heroic heel he belonged to, but he was thick with Mark and Erich again. Everybody's men!

Sid didn't have to argue with anybody; all the wild compulsions and mighty resolves were dead now, anyway until they'd had a good long rest. I sure could use one myself, I knew.

The party at the piano was getting wilder. Lili had been dancing the black bottom on top of it and now she jumped down into Sid's and Sevensee's arms, taking a long time about it. She'd been drinking a lot and her little gray dress looked about as innocent on her as diapers would on Nell Gwyn. She continued her dance, distributing her marks of favor equally between Sid, Erich and the satyr. Beau didn't mind a bit, but serenely pounded out "Tonight's the Night"—which she'd practically shouted to him not two minutes ago.

I was glad to be out of the party. Who can compete with a highly experienced, utterly disillusioned seventeen-year-old really throwing herself away for the first time?

SOMETHING touched my hand. Illy had stretched a tentacle into a furry wire to return me the black glove, although he ought to have known I didn't want it. I pushed it away, privately calling Illy a washed-out moronic tarantula, and right away I felt a little guilty. What right had I to be critical of Illy? Would my own character have shown to advantage if I'd been locked in with eleven octopoids a billion years away? For that matter, where did I get off being critical of anyone?

Still, I was glad to be out of the party, though I kept on watching it. Bruce was drinking alone at the bar. Once Sid had gone over to him and they'd had one together and I'd heard Bruce reciting from Rupert Brooke those deliberately corny lines, "For England's the one land, I know, Where men with Splendid Hearts may go; and Cambridgeshire, of all England, The Shire for Men who Understand;" and I'd remembered that Brooke too had died young in World War One and my ideas had got fuzzy. But mostly Bruce was just calmly drinking by himself. Every once in a while Lili would look at him and stop dead in her dancing and laugh.

I'd figured out this Bruce-Lili-Erich business as well as I cared to. Lili had wanted the nest with all her heart and nothing else would ever satisfy her, and now she'd go to hell her own way and probably die of Bright's disease for a third time in the Change World. Bruce hadn't wanted the

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nest or Lili as much as he wanted the Change World and the chances it gave for Soldierly cavorting and poetic drunks; Lili's seed wasn't his idea of healing the cosmos; maybe he'd make a real mutiny some day, but more likely he'd stick to barroom epics.

His and Lili's infatuation wouldn't die completely, no matter how rancid it looked right now. The real-love angle might go, but Change would magnify the romance angle and it might seem to them like a big thing of a sort if they met again.

Erich had his *Kamerad,* shaped to suit him, who'd had the guts and cleverness to disarm the bomb he'd had the guts to trigger. You have to hand it to Erich for having the nerve to put us all in a situation where we'd have to find the Maintainer or fry, but I don't know anything disgusting enough to hand to him.

I had tried a while back. I had gone up behind him and said, "Hey, how's my wicked little commandant? Forgotten your *und so weiter?*" and as he turned, I clawed my nails and slammed him across the cheek. That's how I got the black eye. Maud wanted to put an electronic leech on it, but I took the old handkerchief in ice water. Well, at any rate Erich had his scratches to match Bruce's not as deep, but four of them, and I told myself maybe they'd get infected—I hadn't washed my hands since the hunt. Not that Erich doesn't love scars.

MARK was the one who helped me up after Erich knocked me down.

"You got any omnias for that?" I snapped at him.

"For what?" Mark asked.

"Oh, for everything that's been happening to us," I told him disgustedly.

He seemed to actually think for a moment and then he said, *"Omnia mutantur, nihil interit."*

"Meaning?" I asked him.

He said, "All things change, but nothing is really lost."

It would be a wonderful philosophy to stand with against the Change Winds. Also damn silly. I wondered if Mark really believed it. I wished I could. Sometimes I come close to thinking it's a lot of baloney trying to be any decent kind of Demon, even a good Entertainer. Then I tell myself, "That's life, Greta. You've got to love through it somehow." But there are times when some of these cookies are not too easy to love.

Something brushed the palm of my hand again. It was Illy's tentacle, with the tendrils of the tip spread out like a little bush. I started to pull my hand away, but then I realized the Loon was simply lonely. I surrendered my

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hand to the patterned gossamer pressures of feather-talk.

Right away I got the words, "Feeling lonely, Greta girl?"

It almost floored me, I tell you. Here I was understanding feather-talk, which I just didn't, and I was understanding it in English, which didn't make sense at all.

For a second, I thought Illy must have spoken, but I knew he hadn't, and for a couple more seconds I thought he was working telepathy on me, using the feather-talk as cues. Then I tumbled to what was happening: he was playing English on my palm like on the keyboard of his squeakbox, and since I could play English on a squeakbox myself, my mind translated automatically.

Realizing this almost gave my mind stage fright, but I was too fagged to be hocused by self-consciousness. I just lay back and let the thoughts come through. It's good to have someone talk to you, even an underweight octopus, and without the squeaks Illy didn't sound so silly; his phrasing was soberer.

"FEELING sad, Greta girl, because you'll never understand what's happening to us all," Illy asked me, "because you'll never be anything but a shadow fighting shadows — and trying to love shadows in between the battles? It's time you understood we're not really fighting a war at all, although it looks that way, but going through a kind of evolution, though not exactly the kind Erich had in mind.

"Your Terran thought has a word for it and a theory for it — a theory that recurs on many worlds. It's about the four orders of life: Plants, Animals, Men and Demons. Plants are energy-binders — they can't move through space or time, but they can clutch energy and transform it. Animals are space-binders — they can move through space. Man (Terran or ET, Lunan or non-Lunan) is a time-binder — he has memory.

"Demons are the fourth order of evolution, possibility-binders—they can make all of what might be part of what is, and that is their evolutionary function. Resurrection is like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly: a third-order being breaks out of the chrysalis of its lifeline into fourth-order life. The leap from the ripped cocoon of an unchanging reality is like the first animal's leap when he ceases to be a plant, and the Change World is the core of meaning behind the many myths of immortality.

"All evolution looks like a war at first — octopoids against monopoids, mammals against reptiles. And it has a necessary dialectic: there must be the thesis — we call it Snake — and the antithesis —

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Spider — before there can be the ultimate synthesis, when all possibilities are fully realized in one ultimate universe. The Change War isn't the blind destruction it seems.

"Remember that the Serpent is your symbol of wisdom and the Spider your sign for patience. The two names are rightly frightening to you, for all high existence is a mixture of horror and delight. And don't be surprised, Greta girl, at the range of my words and thoughts; in a way, I've had a billion years to study Terra and learn her languages and myths.

"Who are the real Spiders and Snakes, meaning who were the first possibility-binders? Who was Adam, Greta girl? Who was Cain? Who were Eve and Lilith?

"In binding all possibility, the Demons also bind the mental with the material. All fourth-order beings live inside and outside all minds, throughout the whole cosmos. Even this Place is, after its fashion, a giant brain: its floor is the brainpan, the boundary of the Void is the cortex of gray matter — yes, even the Major and Minor Maintainers are analogues of the pineal and pituitary glands, which in some form sustain all nervous systems.

"There's the real picture, Greta girl."

The feather-talk faded out and Illy's tendril tips merged into a soft pad on which I fingered, "Thanks, Daddy Longlegs."

CHEWING over in my mind what Illy had just told me, I looked back at the gang around the piano. The party seemed to be breaking up; at least some of them were chopping away at it. Sid had gone to the control divan and was getting set to tune in Egypt. Mark and Kaby were there with him, all bursting with eagerness and the vision of ranks on ranks of mounted Zombie bowmen going up in a mushroom cloud; I thought of what Illy had told me and I managed a smile —seems we've got to win and lose all the battles, every which way.

Mark had just put on his Parthian costume, groaning cheerfully, "Trousers again!" and was striding around under a hat like a fur-lined ice-cream cone and with the sleeves of his metal-stuffed candys flapping over his hands. He waved a short sword with a heart-shaped guard at Bruce and Erich and told them to get a move on.

Kaby was going along on the operation wearing the old-woman disguise intended for Benson-Carter. I got a half-hearted kick out of knowing she was going to have to cover that chest and hobble.

Bruce and Erich weren't taking orders from Mark just yet. Erich went over and said something to Bruce at the bar, and Bruce got

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down and went over with Erich to the piano, and Erich tapped Beau on the shoulder and leaned over and said something to him, and Beau nodded and yanked "Limehouse Blues" to a fast close and started another piece, something slow and nostalgic.

Erich and Bruce waved to Mark and smiled, as if to show him that whether he came over and stood with them or not, the legate and the lieutenant and the commandant were very much together. And while Sevensee hugged Lili with a simple enthusiasm that made me wonder why I've wasted so much imagination on genetic treatments for him, Erich and Bruce sang:

"To the legion of the lost ones, to the cohort of the damned,
To our brothers in the tunnels outside time,
Sing three Change-resistant Zombies, raised from death and robot-crammed,
And Commandos of the Spiders—
Here's to crime!
We're three blind mice on the wrong time-track,
Hush—hush—hush!
We've lost our now and will never get back,
Hush—hush—hush!
Change Commandos out on the spree,
Damned through all possibility,
Ghostgirls, think kindly on such as we,
Hush—hush—hush!"

While they were singing, I looked down at my charcoal skirt and over at Maud and Lili and I thought, "Three gray hustlers for three black hussars, that's our speed." Well, I'd never thought of myself as a high-speed job, winning all the races—I wouldn't feel comfortable that way. Come to think of it, we've got to lose and win all the races in the long run, the way the course is laid out.

I fingered to Illy, "That's the picture, all right, Spider boy."

— FRITZ LEIBER

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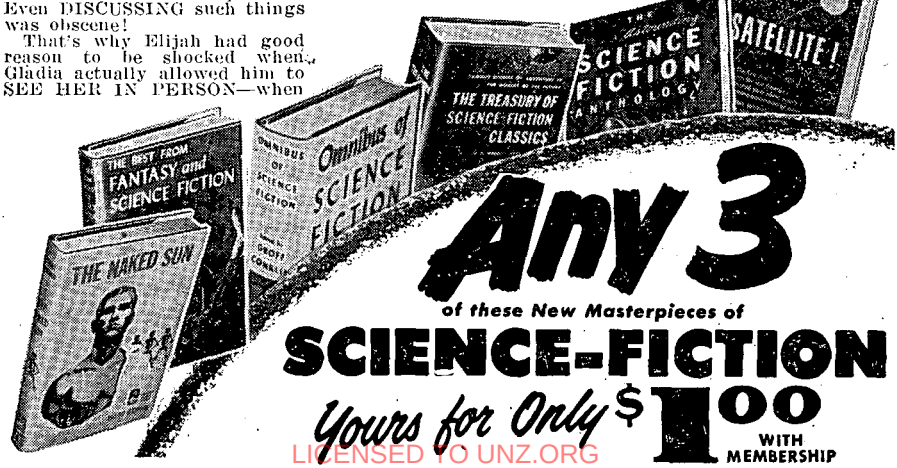
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